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The Waiting Place

by [KariAnn1222](#)

Summary

COMPLETE! When Ron and Hermione are forced prematurely into an act of intimacy out of necessity to save her life following an accident, will they be prepared to handle the consequences? Half-Blood Prince subplot, interweaves with canon.

****WINNER! Best AU, Best Ron, & Best Hermione in the 2012 Romione Awards!****

Notes

Moving on over from FFnet. Plan on having the first 29 chapters up in the next couple of days.

Story notes: The general idea for this story sort of arose from a combination of things, which I regurgitated in my own pervy way: The Star Trek idea of the Vulcan "Pon farr," the concept of "needing" from J.R. Ward's Black Dagger Brotherhood, and all the Hermione/Snape potion accident fics I used to read. (Being a Romione fan at heart, I always wanted to do one for my favorite pairing!)

Warnings: This story contains adult content and language and is intended for adult audiences only; if you are underage there are other, more appropriate stories for you on this site.

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Prologue

"You can get so confused
that you'll start in to race
down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace
and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space,
headed, I fear, toward a most useless place.
The Waiting Place..."

—*Dr. Seuss, Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

oOo

The Waiting Place

Prologue

oOo

Concealing her covert glances behind a heavy volume, she watched the way his bright, cerulean eyes glazed over, the rise and fall of his chest increasing notably before his full lips parted; Hermione Granger's own breathing quickened as the tip of his pink tongue darted out briefly, dampening those lips that had secretly mesmerized her on so many occasions.

Ron Weasley had no idea that she watched him so closely; nor did he know how greatly he affected her—how such a simple act like licking his lips could not only elicit a substantial increase in her heart rate and breathing, but it caused a considerable ache to mount low between her legs, unmistakable warmth originating from her womb.

Desire. This was what physical desire felt like.

It was a shame that what currently captivated Ron, the cause of his physical demeanor that aroused her so, what made his eyes glaze over like that, most decidedly wasn't Hermione. (The very idea was laughable.) Quite the contrary, what had him literally salivating was his brother's fiancée.

Phlegm had just waltzed into the kitchen in all her vomit-inducing, part-Veela glory, emitting careless radiance as she chattered away in that annoying manner of hers, seemingly oblivious to neither the awestruck stare that Ron afforded her nor the immensely annoyed huff that Hermione made.

Frankly, Hermione didn't see what all the fuss was about. So Fleur was a hundred times more beautiful than plain, bookish, prudish Hermione Granger—and pretty much every other girl in the world. Who cares? Ron was beyond shallow and vastly undeserving of her affections if looks were all he cared about.

And what concern of Hermione's was it what sort of girl Ron fancied, anyway? He was rude, uncouth, insensitive, he swore at the drop of a Sickle, and then there was the whole emotional range of a teaspoon thing.

Despite all of her considerable rationalizations, however, Hermione was very aware that what she was experiencing was jealousy, even if she would be hard-pressed to admit that to anyone other than herself. Bottom line: She wanted Ron to look at her the way he was currently looking at Phlegm.

Jealousy. This was what jealousy felt like.

Not that, mind you, Hermione would ever stoop to the level of primping on an everyday basis like some silly little girl to seek the affections of one silly, emotionally impeded boy. Besides, it wasn't as if she could ever come close to competing with the likes of Fleur in the looks department. (The idea was positively atrocious.) No, if Ron was worthy of her, he would appreciate Hermione for the person that she was.

While he's at it, perhaps he'll give up swearing, chocolate frogs, and Quidditch.

She snorted aloud at that thought, which finally had Ron's eyes tearing themselves away from Fleur's backside where she stood in front of the kitchen sink torturing Mrs. Weasley with her incessant prattle.

"What's up with you?" Ron asked, giving Hermione a strange look.

"What's up with you?" she returned coldly, suddenly regretting talking her parents into letting her spend the remainder of her summer holiday at the Burrow and wanting nothing more than to get out of this house where she was forced to witness Ron drooling over Fleur for a good fifteen minutes every time she entered the room.

Feeling somewhat sickened, Hermione closed *Hogwarts, A History* with a *thump* as she stood and left the kitchen as quickly as possible.

"Mental, that one," she swore she heard him mutter as she made her exit.

Waiting. This was what waiting felt like.

Why did it always feel like she was waiting for Ron?

Waiting for him to mature. Waiting for him to actually look at her like she was a woman—the way he looked at Fleur.

Chapter 1: Hermione's Knickers

Chapter One: Hermione's Knickers

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This chapter is set between the events of HBP Chapter Nine: The Half-Blood Prince and Chapter Ten: The House of Gaunt.

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She attempted valiantly to rein in her annoyance, trailing behind her two best friends as they left the Great Hall following dinner. As they climbed the marble staircase, making their way up to Gryffindor Tower after a long and tiresome first day of term, Hermione told herself firmly that she certainly wasn't aggravated that Harry had surpassed her own efforts in Potions and had consequently won the Felix Felicis—but that he had done so by cheating. (Honestly, if he'd only done the work on his own, she would have been quite proud of him.) To make matters worse, he had followed shady instructions scribbled into the margins of a book by a shady owner; who knew who the previous owner had been?

She couldn't resist rolling her eyes at the backs of Harry and Ron's heads as they reached the portrait hole, the two boys firmly ensconced in an animated discussion concerning who might be trying out for the Gryffindor house team this year.

Hermione supposed she should feel relieved that Harry now seemed too distracted to obsess over his absurd notion that Malfoy had replaced his father as a Death Eater, but instead she found herself doubly annoyed that Harry and Ron could so readily move on to lighter topics, as if they'd already forgotten about that troublesome book; and then there was the way Ron had so eagerly defended Harry's position: "He only followed different instructions to ours. Could've been a catastrophe, couldn't it? But he took a risk and it paid off."

What irritated her the most, she admitted to herself only grudgingly as she clamored through the portrait hole behind the two boys, was that his argument held a certain amount of logic. Not that, mind you, she would ever admit that to *him*.

As usual, the common room was warmly lit, with low tables, overstuffed chairs, and sofas scattered here and there; a dozen or so of their fellow Gryffindors lounged about, some still in their school uniforms and others having changed into casual Muggle attire for the evening; some students studied while others chatted or played card games.

Luckily, the sofa by the hearth that the trio preferred was blessedly unoccupied, and Hermione settled into the cushions with a huff, secretly pleased when Ron flopped down next to her—he was gesturing wildly as he mimed saving a Quaffle, completely enraptured in his conversation—while Harry took the armchair facing them.

Honestly, is Quidditch all boys think about? she thought in mild irritation as she riffled through her book bag in search of her quill and ink, desiring to get a start on her Runes homework; only the first day of term, she mused, and already she was swamped.

However, her silent inquiry was answered in the next moment by a familiar feminine voice: "Hi, Ron."

She glanced up to see her dorm mate, Lavender Brown, smiling beatifically at Ron and flashing

quite a bit of smooth, toned thigh beneath her magically-shortened hemline as she passed on her way up to the girls' dormitories, dragging a giggling Parvati behind her.

Immediately, Hermione's eyes jerked to Ron, her breath halting as she gauged his reaction: Although he wasn't salivating like he had over the summer in response to Fleur, his chest puffed up notably at the unexpected female attention, and he looked rather pleased with himself as he continued his miming—only somehow even more enthusiastically.

She huffed again as she pulled out her textbook. *Not here, too*, she thought sourly, remembering how she'd been relieved to have escaped Fleur's presence at the Burrow and therefore Ron's incessant drooling. However, while his fascination with Fleur had merely been a nuisance, this particular development had the potential to be disastrous since not only was Lavender Brown everything Ron evidently prized in a woman—namely, she was pretty, blonde, and lacked the capacity for complex thought—but she wasn't engaged to his brother, and, worst of all, she was clearly interested in Ron. (Hermione couldn't help but notice that Lavender had made it a point to giggle ridiculously over a comment he'd made earlier that day, earning the same pleased response from him.)

Since when was Lavender interested in Ron, for crying out loud? Although it wasn't terribly surprising that another girl would find him attractive, in their dormitory over the years Lavender had quipped to Hermione on several occasions, "Really, I don't know why you hang out with him, Hermione—he's so rude!"

"Not to mention vulgar!" Parvati would add in her two Sickles. "You should've heard the conversation I overheard him having with Seamus..."

Hermione bit her lower lip, feeling suddenly incensed, unable to concentrate on the textbook open in her lap and considering going to the library; she really needed to get in some work before the prefects' meeting, and Ron was (annoyingly) becoming more of a distraction to her than ever before.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked suddenly, halting his conversation with Harry as Hermione began packing up her bag.

"Going to the library," she said with another barely suppressed eye-roll. "I need to get some work done before the meeting, and it's getting a bit loud in here." Indeed, more and more students had gradually begun filing into the common room as dinner wound down, and the noise level had risen considerably as those assembled laughed and conversed with their friends that they hadn't seen all summer; not to mention, many of them were staring at Harry, pointing and whispering, no doubt speculating over the "Chosen One" business they'd been reading about in the *Prophet*.

"Meeting? What meeting?"

"Oh, honestly, Ron—the *prefects' meeting*? The one that we're both required to attend, seeing as we're both prefects?"

"Bloody hell," he groaned in response, raking a hand through his ginger hair and making it stand on end. "I'd forgotten."

"There's a surprise," she muttered as she stuffed her quill, ink, and parchment back into her bag with more force than was necessarily required.

"And what's that supposed to mean, exactly?"

"I don't know, Ron; why don't you wrack your brains and figure it out?" *That oughtn't take too*

long, she added silently, aware that he was undeserving of her malice since he hadn't done more than be pleased by Lavender's attention—but she couldn't seem to stop her annoyance.

"What's gotten your knickers in a twist, anyway?" he asked, sitting up straighter as he turned to face her fully, his voice caught between hurt, anger, and confusion as his ears turned a violent shade of scarlet.

"As if you've ever given any thought as to the state of my knickers," she snapped back unthinkingly, her own face burning hotly as she watched Ron's jaw drop; across from them Harry was frozen, appearing almost as dumbfounded as Ron.

"Wh—what—?" Ron's mouth was opening and closing in an almost comedic manner, and Hermione shook her head, mortified that she'd allowed that to slip out; normally her brain-to-mouth filter was quite sufficient.

"Never mind," she said quickly. "I'm just a bit tired; long first day and all. Would either of you like any help with your homework?" she added hastily—anything to get their thoughts off of her ill-considered retort.

"Yeah, all right, then," Ron said after a moment, the color of his ears gradually returning to normal, though she couldn't help but notice the sidelong glances he threw at her as he retrieved his own books and parchment from his bag, as if he wasn't quite sure he'd heard what he thought he'd heard.

As for Harry, he seemed to have decided to pretend she hadn't made the comment regarding her knickers as he scooted his chair closer to Ron and Hermione. "I vote we practice nonverbal spells for a bit, since I don't really fancy being Snape's guinea pig."

"Agreed," said Ron, and, minutes later, Hermione had shrugged out of her school robes and cast a Muffling Charm around their area of the common room in an effort to drown out some of the surrounding ruckus.

For half an hour Ron and Harry attempted to silently levitate couch cushions, both of them purple in the face, as Hermione encouraged them and gave pointers while simultaneously getting a start on her Ancient Runes homework. At long last Ron collapsed next to her once more, slightly closer than he had been before, his trouser-clad thigh now pressed against her bare one. "This is bloody useless," he grumbled while Harry plopped back down heavily in his own chair, issuing a grunt of agreement.

"Don't worry—you'll get it, Ron," she said supportively. "You too, Harry. It just takes practice."

"That's easy for you to say, 'Ermione; you're good at everything." Ron's blue eyes shone with sincerity, and Hermione bit her lip as she felt herself warming considerably, remembering that he'd also complimented her earlier in Potions: "You are the best in the year—I'd've told him so if he'd asked me!" She mused that he really could be sweet at times; his heart was the first positive thing she'd ever noticed about him.

Just as that thought crossed her mind, she noticed his gaze drop to where their legs touched: Her skirt had ridden up significantly, revealing an almost obscene amount of thigh; she shifted hurriedly, tugging her skirt back over her knees where it belonged while Ron hastily averted his eyes, moving away from her slightly so that they were no longer touching.

Her skin seemed to burn where his body heat had scorched her through his clothing moments before.

If Harry had noticed this exchange, he gave no sign of it, as he'd taken his battered Potions book back out and was submersed in the text; Hermione pursed her lips at the reminder of their earlier disagreement but decided not to comment. "Potions next?" she asked without quite looking at Ron, her voice unusually high, and he replied with a cough of agreement as she put away her Runes textbook and withdrew her copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*.

The three of them worked on their fifteen-inch essays on the pros and cons of Veritaserum use, Hermione feeling surprisingly amenable as she answered their frequent questions, especially with Ron so close to her, his breath on her ear, which caused her to shiver slightly every time he turned to make an inquiry. His body's close proximity to hers was intoxicating, the scent of his skin and hair overwhelming; it was decidedly masculine, somewhat woodsy, and distinctly Ron—and it was exactly the third aroma she'd picked up in the Amortentia, right alongside the freshly mown grass and new parchment.

She warmed at the thought, thinking it absurd that she would smell Ron in a love potion—

A flash of movement caught her attention, and she looked up to see that Lavender and Parvati had come back down, having changed into pink-and-white striped pajama bottoms and fitted spaghetti-strap tops—Lavender's in pink, Parvati's in white—showcasing an ample amount of smooth, tanned skin and cleavage.

Hermione felt a heavy weight settle in the pit of her stomach as she saw Ron notice them; Lavender smiled at him again as she walked by, and Hermione felt ill as she watched him smile back, his eyes falling to her sizeable chest as his face took on that same dopey expression she'd come to associate with Fleur—but then she'd passed, and Ron was staring at his parchment once more, his lips pressed into a thin line, an expression like guilt on his face as he glanced at Hermione out of the corner of his eye.

Typical, she thought as she began packing up her bag once more. "It's almost time for the meeting," she said in response to Harry's questioning look.

"Oh, all right, I'll see you guys later." But Harry was no longer paying her any attention and, following his gaze across the common room, she saw him watching Ginny in a far corner, who was laughing at something Dean had said, her lovely features alight with glee.

Hermione shook her head knowingly and, without a look at Ron, turned to take her bag up to her dormitory; when she returned moments later, he was waiting for her by the portrait hole, his hands shoved deeply into his pockets, but she ignored him as she climbed through without a word.

oOo

She was completely and utterly mental; there was no other explanation for her baffling behavior. One minute Hermione was smiling at him and being all nice, and the next she wouldn't even speak to him or bloody look at him.

What the fuck?

Was it just Hermione, or were all birds that barmy? Well, he knew that Ginny was, at least.

Ron Weasley was confused as hell as he marched into his dormitory after enduring an hour of prefect rounds that had been preceded by an hour-long meeting that had been so boring that he'd literally been tempted to gouge his eyes out; at least that would've been somewhat entertaining in comparison.

To make matters worse, Hermione had ignored him the whole bloody time.

What the fuck?

As he stripped down to his shorts—the curtains around Harry's and Neville's respective beds were drawn, and Dean and Seamus were still down in the common room, which Ron was glad for since he didn't feel like talking to anyone—he admitted to himself that maybe he did know why Hermione was so bleeding angry: She'd seen him looking at Lavender and Parvati.

Fucking Merlin, he thought irritably as he climbed into bed, leaving his clothes on the floor for the house-elves and yanking the curtains closed around him. Was it his bloody fault that Lavender and Parvati had big tits and that they'd practically been walking around with flashing neon signs that said, "Look at me, look at me"? He didn't bloody well think so.

He had *eyes*, for Merlin's sake, and he rather fancied looking at females—fit ones, anyway. He couldn't help that.

Just like he hadn't been able to help but stare at Hermione's thigh when he'd noticed her skirt bunched up practically around her bits, her skin warm against his, even through his trousers...

His cock gave a jolt in his shorts. *Hermione's bits*.

Then he thought about what she'd said after dinner: "As if you've ever given any thought as to the state of my knickers." Was that really what she thought? That he never thought about her knickers or...about what was inside them?

If only she bloody knew, she'd be so shocked and...

Wait. Why would she care if I was thinking about her knickers? Does she want me to think about her knickers?

And just like that his dick was hard as a rock, just begging for its nightly wank.

Without hesitation, Ron took his cock out of his pants and began stroking it to thoughts of Hermione's creamy-looking thigh. Was it wrong to wank while thinking about one of your best mates? Even if said mate had a pussy rather than a dick? (He reckoned it'd be even weirder if Hermione had a dick, a disturbing thought that he quickly banished.) He'd done it a million times already, but there was still something...dirty about knowing that Hermione would probably be disgusted if she knew, so he tried to think about Lavender and her big tits and smooth-looking hair, but that didn't seem to do it for him...

With a sigh of resignation, he imagined fisting Hermione's wild, bushy hair with one hand while sliding her cotton knickers down her trembling white thighs before parting her legs, gripping her plump arse in his free hand. She'd tremble and moan and mewl as he slipped inside her pussy, which he imagined to be tight and slick just for him; all he had to do was think about pounding into her little virginal body, making her scream his name, and Ron came hard, shoving his free fist into his mouth to stifle his groan as he ejaculated all over his stomach and chest in no time, twisting on the mattress and imagining that he was filling her up with his cum...

After giving himself a moment of recovery, Ron hastily cleaned himself up with his wand, experiencing, as usual, a strange mixture of guilt and longing.

He had it bad for her, and he knew it. (The realization had actually sorta struck him over the summer.) If only he could quit being a bloody prat and find the courage to buck up and tell her...

Chapter 2: The Lavender Problem

Chapter Two: The Lavender Problem

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This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Fourteen: Felix Felicis.

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That morning in mid-November had dawned clear and crisp, the enchanted ceiling in the Great Hall reflecting the same pale blue that had greeted him outside his dormitory window earlier; likewise, his fellow Gryffindors greeted him just as cheerfully as he took a seat next to Harry at the Gryffindor table, ignoring Lavender Brown, who called out, "Cheer up, Ron! I know you'll be brilliant!"

Ordinarily the attention from the pretty blonde might have stroked his ego, made him stand a little taller, but on this morning nothing could make him feel better. Ron couldn't remember the last time he'd been in such a foul mood.

Hold up, yeah he could: It had been when Hermione had gone with Krum to the Yule Ball in fourth year.

Fucking Krum.

"Tea?" Harry was asking him. "Coffee? Pumpkin juice?"

"Anything," he grumbled, picking up a piece of toast absently and biting into it angrily.

It was hard for him to believe that just a couple of short weeks ago he'd been elated about Hermione asking him to Slughorn's Christmas party, but now—thanks to his stupid slag sister who couldn't seem to keep her tongue out of Dean Thomas's throat—all he could think about was Hermione and Krum locked in a passionate embrace. The image haunted him at all times, his active imagination coming up with elaborate, varying scenarios, but each one involved that brute with his over-large hands all over her body while he snogged her senseless.

Bloody hell, maybe Ron had even been wrong to assume that Hermione was still a virgin; if they'd been snogging each other, who knew what else they'd gotten up to? The bloke was an international Quidditch star, for Merlin's sake, with no doubt loads of experience manipulating and seducing young, naïve, unsuspecting witches...

The idea of that bleeding tosser...*doing* things to Hermione made his blood boil and his vision turn red. To make things worse, he now couldn't imagine why she'd wanted to take him, Ron, to Slughorn's party to begin with when all she had to do was owl up Krum—they were apparently still close; Ron knew they wrote—and then Hermione could spend the evening snogging *him*, or shagging him, or whatever bloody else they got up to that Ron had had no clue about...

Well, he had a clue now, fuck you very much, and seeing as Ron was no Quidditch star—lately he couldn't play for shite to save his bollocks from a pack of angry bollock-eating Skrewts—he could only imagine that Hermione had invited him to the party out of pity; pity because poor little Ronniekins wasn't a part of her sacred little "Slug Club." Poor Ronniekins didn't get invited to dinner parties and whatnot because he wasn't the bloody Chosen One who'd beaten You-Know-Who again and again, and he wasn't that fuck-tard McLaggen with his connections to the bloke who'd invented Wart-Be-Gone (or whatever the blazes it was) and biceps the size of Beater's bats.

No, he was just stupid Ron Weasley with his too-short hand-me-down robes, who only made it onto the Gryffindor House team because he just happened to be best mates with the Captain; Ron Weasley, who'd never snogged a girl because he was a bloody pathetic prat, as his stupid, slaggy sister had so nicely pointed out (He could still hear her shrill voice in his head: "...you've got about as much experience as a twelve-year-old!" Sad thing was, she was right.); Ron Weasley, who was forever in the shadow of Harry effing Potter and five successful older brothers, if you counted Percy the Prat, that is—and now, the morning of their first match of the season, the match against Slytherin, he knew he was gonna fuck it up. Already, the rest of the team wanted to see him chucked, and he almost wished Harry would listen to 'em.

"How are you both feeling?"

Ron stiffened at her voice before swallowing his bite of toast and throwing the uneaten portion onto his plate. *And there she is, ladies and gents, the star of my dreams—and, lately, nightmares—herself. For one night only, watch 'er kick Ron Weasley in the bollocks! Can I get a round of applause?*

"Fine," Harry answered for the both of them and then pressed a glass of pumpkin juice into Ron's hand. "There you go, Ron. Drink up."

"Don't drink that, Ron!"

He looked up at Hermione, partly startled but mostly annoyed, and trying hard not to notice how pretty she looked with her hair pulled back, several ringlets hanging in her face. "Why not?"

"You just put something in that drink," she stated while staring pointedly at Harry.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I saw you. You just tipped something into Ron's drink. You've got the bottle in your hand right now!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry replied, while Ron thought derisively, *What? She thinks my best mate would poison me? She must be off her rocker.*

"Ron, I warn you, don't drink it!" Hermione persisted, her voice alarmed as Ron pressed the glass to his lips in an act of defiance, determined to drink it simply because she didn't want him to, and swallowed it in one go.

"Stop bossing me around, Hermione," he said as he savored the lingering taste and smacked his lips in satisfaction at the outraged expression on her face. *Maybe she'll learn to mind her own damned business for once—I'll eat and drink what I bloody like!*

A part of him felt guilty over the way he'd been behaving toward her, especially since she seemed so clueless about why, but all he had to do was think about Krum on top of her, running his filthy hands all over her as he ate her face, and his guilt melted away like the last winter's snow, replaced by a cold vindictiveness.

"Nearly time," Harry told him, cutting into his thoughts as Hermione stormed away, livid.

Good riddance, Ron thought harshly as he and Harry stood together and exited the Great Hall, making their way down to the Quidditch pitch on that bright, dewy morning that Ron couldn't appreciate; it felt like there was a Quaffle in his stomach, making it difficult to breathe.

"Pretty lucky the weather's this good, eh?"

"Yeah," Ron replied shortly, not at all in the mood for small talk.

Several moments later they reached the changing rooms, where Ginny and Demelza were waiting, both girls already wearing their Quidditch robes.

"Conditions look ideal," Ginny began when she saw Harry and pointedly ignored Ron. "And guess what? The Slytherin Chaser, Vaisey—he took a Bludger in the head yesterday during their practice, and he's too sore to play! And even better than that—Malfoy's gone off sick, too!"

"What?" Harry practically shouted while Ron stared at her, dumbfounded. "He's ill? What's wrong with him?"

"No idea, but it's great for us. They're playing Harper instead; he's in my year and he's an idiot."

As Ron began pulling on his robes, he couldn't believe their luck. No Malfoy! Could things possibly get any better?

"Fishy, isn't it?" Harry whispered to him once they were both dressed (mostly) for the match. "Malfoy not playing?"

"Lucky, I call it. And Vaisey off too, he's their best goal scorer, I didn't fancy—hey!" He stared at Harry, pausing in the act of pulling on his gloves as something occurred to him: It was lucky, wasn't? And Hermione had said she'd seen Harry putting something in his drink. That was no coincidence...was it?

"What?"

"I...you..." Ron dropped his voice, conscious of the others in the nearby vicinity. "My drink... my pumpkin juice...you didn't...?"

Harry didn't answer the question outright, but merely raised his eyebrows and said, "We'll be starting in about five minutes, you'd better get your boots on."

A slow, knowing grin spread across Ron's face, and he felt abruptly as if the weight of the world had slipped off his shoulders; so he said the first and only thing to come to mind, the only thing he felt to be appropriate: "Wicked."

oOo

Ron stormed his way back up to the castle, Hermione's words echoing in his head: "You spiked Ron's juice with lucky potion...that's why everything went right...and Ron saved everything!" But she had been wrong, hadn't she? Harry hadn't spiked his drink at all; Ron had saved all those goals all by himself.

But *she* thought he was rubbish at everything, didn't she? He may not be Viktor bloody Krum, but he reckoned he'd proven himself out there today, hadn't he?—but it wasn't good enough for perfect, I-can-do-no-wrong Hermione Granger, was it?

What? Ron saved everything? It must have been because Harry spiked his drink with Felix Felicis.

As he marched across the sprawling turf, kicking at a rock irritably, he found it hard to believe that his spirits had been soaring only minutes before due to Gryffindor's spectacular win, which was thanks in large part to himself.

He deserved to celebrate, and he was determined to enjoy the party, dammit.

Unsurprisingly, by the time he got up to the Fat Lady the party was in full swing: Several sets of hands literally hauled him through the portrait hole as it opened, and he barely had time to register the raucous music and laughter before an ice-cold butterbeer was pressed into his hands, which he downed in three large gulps.

His spirits were quickly lifted once more as his teammates and fellow Gryffindors gathered around to congratulate him on a job well done—even though he could still hear Hermione's haughty accusations in the back of his mind, which he pushed aside—and Seamus Finnigan's arm came around his shoulders, his voice never wavering as he loudly delivered the punch line of a joke he'd been in the process of telling: "...so I says to 'er, 'Love, if yeh 'ad as many dicks sticking out o'ya as yeh've 'ad sticking *in* ya, yeh'd look like a bleedin' porcupine!"

All the blokes within earshot roared with laughter while most of the birds, including Demelza Robins and Romilda Vane, groaned and rolled their eyes.

"Seamus, that's revolting," Ginny stated, her arm firmly wrapped around Dean's waist, which had Ron averting his eyes in renewed anger and disgust as he heard his sister's biting words in his head once more: "...it's pathetic! If you went out and got a bit of snogging done yourself, you wouldn't mind so much that everyone else does it!"

Yeah, well, maybe I will! he thought hotly as Seamus pressed a bottle into his hands, which Ron at first took to be another butterbeer. "This 'ere's the good stuff," he said lowly, where only Ron could hear him, "but let's keep it on the down-low, yeah? Wouldn't want McGonagall t'get wind, lest she pull the plug on us—not to mention, this 'ere could get me expelled, and Mum wouldn't be too 'appy 'bout that, would she?"

He grinned at Seamus, his good mood returning abruptly. "Cheers, mate." Then he took a hearty swig from the bottle and promptly began to sputter and cough as his eyes watered, the firewhisky burning its way down his throat.

"Told ya it's the good stuff, didn't I?" Seamus smirked, slapping Ron on the back before catching sight of Coote, one of the new Beaters, and off Seamus strode as he called out: "Oi! Wicked aim with that Bludger! Nearly knocked that tosser Harper straight off 'is broom, ya did!"

With a shrug, Ron took another swill from the bottle; again, the rancid liquor burned, but he was pleased that he didn't sputter and cough like a prat this time, at least. Drinking firewhisky was something he wouldn't mind getting used to. (Dimly, he heard Hermione's ever-present, bossy voice in the back of his mind: *Ron, you're a prefect! You have to set a good example!*)

He shunned her voice as he took a third, defiant swig.

"Hello, Ron. I told you that you'd be brilliant; I always had faith in you."

His head whipped over to see a familiar pretty, busty blonde emerge, pushing her way through the throng of partiers; Lavender Brown was wearing a low-cut pink top, and his eyes were drawn straight to her ample cleavage: "Hey, Lavender," he said, addressing her tits and feeling vaguely surprised by his confidence, which he easily blamed on the firewhisky.

There was a glowing warmth that had settled in his chest, and he felt strangely relaxed suddenly. And he quite liked the way Lavender was looking at him, like he was...well, *desirable*. Masculine. An athlete. In short, like he was a Viktor Krum. ('Course, it didn't hurt that she had a nice rack.) For a moment, he again envisioned Krum on top of Hermione, which only reinforced the idea that he wasn't doing anything wrong by talking to Lavender.

Hermione had kissed Krum and done who-knew-what else, so Ron was free to do whatever he wanted with whomever he wanted. (It wasn't like he'd promised Hermione anything, other than to go to a stupid party—as friends, no doubt was all she meant.) And going by the way Lavender was looking at him and slowly sashaying closer, he felt hopeful that that "whatever" might just be a whole helluva lot...

Besides, unlike some, Lavender had faith in him—she'd just said so; she apparently didn't think he was rubbish.

"Aren't you going to offer a lady a drink?" she said with a flirtatious bat of her eyelashes as she sidled up to him, slipping an arm low around his waist, and Ron didn't protest as she took the bottle from his hands and lifted it to her own lips, taking a dainty sip. Up close, he could see that she was wearing quite a lot of make-up, and her eyelashes were coated so thickly with mascara that they reminded him of a spider's legs, an idea that made him shudder—and not in a good way.

"Drink this stuff a lot?" he asked, noting how she hadn't coughed or gagged as he had, and she giggled as if his question was the height of hilarity while looping her arms up around his neck; he hadn't meant it as a joke, but he couldn't help but feel pleased that Lavender apparently thought he was funny. Even when he was purposely being funny, Hermione usually just scowled at him or rolled her eyes...

Ron closed his eyes as he tilted his head toward Lavender's on instinct, and his raging hormones took over; her warm, curvy, feminine body pressed against his, causing his cock to stir in his trousers instantaneously. He couldn't help but think about Hermione and how sweet it would be if it was *her* body pressed so enticingly against him, but that fantasy was shattered in the next instant when Lavender's wet mouth latched itself onto his: She tasted wrong, like firewhisky—and cigarettes?—but that distinction didn't seem to matter to his perpetually horny teenage body.

oOo

Hermione stared at the underside of the canopy of her four-poster, concentrating on breathing in and out steadily, willing herself not to start crying again; she'd attempted to seek solace in her old favorite, *Hogwarts, A History*, but not even the familiar, comforting passages could block out the image of Ron locked in a passionate embrace with Lavender, which seemed to be branded permanently on her retinas.

She bit her lip in an effort to stifle a sob as she rolled onto her side—still fully clothed—and clutched the volume to her chest, wondering what she had done to offend Ron so: He'd agreed to accompany her to Slughorn's party, hadn't he? Things had been rather pleasant between them there for a couple of weeks, hadn't they? They had even been united in their belief that Harry's Malfoy-Is-a-Death-Eater theory was a stretch of the imagination, considering that Malfoy hadn't even been in Hogsmeade on the day that Katie Bell had been Imperius'ed to deliver that cursed necklace to the castle.

Yet then Ron had started acting cold, even contemptuous, straight out of the blue, and Hermione had spent more hours than she cared to admit trying to figure out exactly what had gone wrong. And now this, the metaphorical icing on top of the cake: Ron had evidently decided that he fancied gluing his face to Lavender Brown's.

Of course, it didn't come as a total surprise, did it? She had noticed Ron noticing Lavender earlier in the term, and the latter had certainly made no attempt to hide the fact that she fancied Ron, had she? Even still, why had he agreed to go to Slughorn's Christmas party with Hermione if he was just going to chuck her like so much disposable rubbish?

Unless, she realized with a wave of nausea, he'd assumed that I meant as friends.

Hermione nearly laughed derisively at that, thinking that of course that's what Ron had thought. She wasn't deluded, after all: She knew that she was no Fleur Delacour, Madam Rosmerta, Parvati Patil, or Lavender Brown. Those women were all curvy, vivacious, and flirtatious. *Not to mention brainless, promiscuous*, she added to herself viciously, but she knew she was being overly harsh. After all, it wasn't their fault that Ron wasn't attracted to her, Hermione.

But if that's true, she tried arguing with herself, *then why the jealousy fourth year in regard to Viktor?* Unless she'd misinterpreted his behavior, and his response hadn't been jealousy at all, but merely brotherly protection.

She nearly sobbed anew at that thought, putting a considerable amount of effort into stifling the urge to seek Ron out and set canaries on him all over again; an admittedly childish part of herself even desired to hop out of bed and destroy Lavender's things as she envisioned what Lavender and Ron could possibly be getting up to at this hour. (Hermione had spent part of the day following the Quidditch match in the library and the remainder in her dormitory, the curtains drawn around her bed. As the sun had set, the hours melting away, and Lavender still had not come up to bed, Hermione's anxiety and vindictiveness had increased—especially as she remembered how Ron had dragged Lavender, laughing, into a classroom that he'd undoubtedly believed to be empty. What had he intended for Lavender in a deserted classroom? A bit more than snogging, she assumed, seeing as he evidently had no problem with making a public spectacle of himself.)

Yet Hermione could hardly blame Lavender for this, could she? After all, even though they were friendly—one didn't share a dorm with someone for five years without getting to know them on a certain level—they weren't exactly friends, were they? Although Hermione had comforted Lavender last year when her boyfriend from back home had broken it off with her, and in fourth year Lavender had done Hermione's make-up in preparation for the Yule Ball, Hermione had never confided in the other girl, being the private person that she was. (Actually, Hermione didn't have any female friends that she confided in—not even Ginny. While she was happy to listen to Ginny and to offer her advice, Hermione had never opened up to the younger girl about the fact that she was in love with her brother.)

But Lavender would know how Hermione felt about Ron now, wouldn't she? The birds she'd set on him hadn't exactly been subtle, and she imagined that she'd fueled the rumor mill for weeks: Tomorrow everyone would be muttering about how Hermione Granger had attacked Ron Weasley in a fit of jealous rage over the fact that he was snogging Lavender Brown—that is, if they weren't already.

At that moment her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the door opening, and two familiar, giggling voices could be heard crossing the threshold: "Do you think she's sleeping?"

"Shhh."

Their voices lowered then, but as Hermione listened to Lavender and Parvati getting ready for bed, she caught snippets of their conversation: "...good kisser...actually *attacked* him...scratches all over...psychotic...jealous...poor Won-Won..."

Fresh tears burned Hermione's eyes, and she felt somewhat betrayed despite the fact that Lavender and Parvati were best friends: Hadn't Hermione comforted Parvati just weeks ago when she'd come to the library crying because her mother was threatening to withdraw her and her twin sister from school? And now she was joining in with Lavender to gossip at Hermione's expense.

As she rolled back onto her back, she realized that her only true friend was Harry, but even Harry tended to duck his head down when she and Ron were rowing.

Chapter 3: Lavender Brown & the Rack Pack

Chapter Three: Lavender Brown & the Rack Pack

oOo

This chapter begins within HBP Chapter Fifteen: The Unbreakable Vow, and continues through Chapter Seventeen: A Sluggish Memory.

oOo

Ron watched on longingly as Hermione swept down the stairs of her dormitory, looking fuck-hot in a red dress that had to be against some sort of school dress code, as it accentuated all of her curves; she wasn't overly bosomy like Lavender—who was actually rather top-heavy, come to think of it, with a bony arse—but the clinginess of the fabric emphasized just how perfectly high and round her small tits were, and he couldn't help but stare at Hermione's delightfully but subtly plump arse as she sauntered to the portrait hole without a glance in his direction, her cute little nose in the air.

His blood boiled as she greeted Cormac McLaggen with a bright smile, and the brute wrapped both arms around her and pulled her petite form into his rather strapping one—really, was the bloke taking some sort of muscle-growth potion, or what? Ron smirked when she hastily disentangled herself from his Beater bat-like arms, but then frowned a moment later when she slipped one of her arms in his instead and continued to beam up at him, leaning into him, as they disappeared through the portrait hole together.

Fucking McLaggen.

What the hell did Hermione see in him, anyway? Sure, some of the birds liked him, and, all right, Ron admitted grudgingly that he was a fair Quidditch player, but that didn't change the fact that he was a right dirty git.

With a knot of unease settling in the pit of his stomach, Ron recalled how he'd made fun of her earlier that day in Transfiguration; maybe Harry was right, and he shouldn't have done it, but it served her right for going out with the likes of McLaggen, didn't it? (He ignored the fact that at the time he'd had no idea who she was taking to the party—and, likewise, he ignored the fact that it would've been him, Ron, whose arm would currently be intertwined with hers if he hadn't gotten together with Lavender; Hermione might be beaming up at him with those chocolate-colored eyes at this very moment instead of hating his guts, and who knows what might've happened between them under the influence of butterbeer and in the festive Christmas atmosphere?)

He rubbed his unshaven jaw with a heavy sigh, and as he pulled his arm back from his face, he caught sight of the angry red marks etched on his forearms and the backs of his hands: The evidence of his encounter with Hermione's birds was taking longer to heal than should be normal, and he could only reckon that that was her doing.

Ron felt uncomfortable, and quite a bit guilty, as he recalled the incident in question: He'd been confused by her rage at the time, since she'd previously made it pretty bloody clear (at least to him) that she felt nothing for him beyond friendship and pity, but he'd soon come to realize that her actions could only be caused by jealousy.

The idea that his going out with Lavender made Hermione jealous had at first empowered him, and he'd taken every opportunity to rub their relationship in her snooty, know-it-all face, but he

had to admit to himself that lately he was feeling pretty effing cruddy about it on top of everything else; it was now blatantly obvious that he was hurting Hermione, but it was sort of her own fault, though, wasn't it? She'd gotten with Krum, hadn't she? It wasn't Ron's fault that now that he was taken she was wishing she'd snatched 'im up while she'd had the chance. *Tough bleedin' luck. Maybe next time she won't take me for granted.* Assuming there'd even *be* a next time, which Ron wasn't so sure about.

Even still, he hated seeing her with that fuck-tard McLaggen; okay, that was a bit of an understatement. In point of fact, he wanted to beat the tosser to a bleeding pulp.

"Won-Won, I'm standing under the mistletoe!"

Even as Ron winced slightly at the terrible nickname, rising from the armchair to oblige his girlfriend, he couldn't help but grin at the reminder that at least he had Lav to help ease his suffering; she may be a bit...irritating at times, and slightly daft, but at least she laughed at his jokes and made him feel wanted and witty; she didn't criticize him or make him feel stupid or lazy. 'Course, it helped that they didn't do a whole lot of talking. Their time together these last weeks had consisted mainly of snogging and, when they were alone, a lot of heavy petting.

He may still be a virgin, but at least his stupid sister couldn't say he was inexperienced.

oOo

It was the first evening after the start of the new term, and Ron was attempting to focus on his Charms homework—his marks were suffering without Hermione's help, so he was forced to put more effort into his work so he didn't flunk all his classes—which was difficult to do with Lavender wrapped around him like a suffocating cloak, planting sloppy kisses all over his face. He attempted half-heartedly to shrug her off, hoping she'd get the hint, but all she did was cling to him even tighter and croon about how much she'd missed her "Won-Won" over the Christmas holiday.

He tried to smile—and managed a grimace, at least—rather than roll his eyes, which had her erupting into a fit of joyous giggles, but then she stopped laughing abruptly as her fingers played with his collar, and she regarded him with what she no doubt considered to be a stern expression: "Won-Won, you're not wearing the necklace I gave you!"

Bloody hell. He winced at the reminder of the terrible Christmas present as he looked around her, staring at his Charms textbook in search of inspiration; finding none there, he invented wildly: "Oh—yeah—well, I didn't wanna lose it—or break it, see—so it's upstairs, under my pillow, where it'll be safe..."

He trailed off, knowing how lame it sounded, but Lavender clutched his cheeks in both her hands, squishing his face absurdly as she looked him straight in the eye and said slowly, "That. Is just. The sweetest *thing*." And then she kissed him, practically shoving her tongue down his throat in her exuberance, and though there was a large part of him that felt extreme annoyance and longed for nothing more than to shove her off of him, another wholly male part of him reacted automatically: His cock hardened of its own accord as she continued to attack his face, snogging him like it was going out of style—and his hard-on evidently wasn't lost on her as she purred against his mouth, grinding her hips against him, which had Ron's body bucking instinctively against her.

When her lips pulled back from his briefly, her blouse was gaping, and he was afforded with a wonderful view of her large, high tits; that, combined with the way she was grinding against him, was doing a number on him.

Holy fuck.

'Course, he'd seen her completely topless, so there were no surprises there, and they'd touched each others' bits in the weeks leading up to Christmas, but his memories of panting and cumming together in dusty broom cupboards and empty classrooms only seemed to fuel his guilt-infused lust.

The associating guilt, of course, was inspired by a couple of things: One, he knew that Lavender cared about him—at least she thought she did—and Ron didn't return those feelings, and he knew it was wrong to carry on like this, to use her to satisfy his physical urges and to stroke his own ego. (How ashamed his parents would be of him if they knew what he was doing!) And two, he couldn't fool around with Lavender without seeing Hermione's hurt expression in the moments before she'd had those birds attack him, but at the same time he couldn't stop himself from imagining Hermione in Lavender's place every time they snogged, or did more. He really was a bloody pathetic, disgusting tosser, wasn't he? The whole thing was just fucked up on so many different levels.

Around them, their fellow Gryffindors made retching noises, and Seamus told them rather loudly to get a room—and was that a paper airplane that just hit him in the back of the head?—but all Lavender did was kiss her way up to his ear and whisper, "That's okay if you don't wanna wear it, 'cause that wasn't your *real* present anyway."

Ron froze up as she nibbled his ear, sure that he'd heard her incorrectly, because surely this daft, persistent bird wasn't saying what he thought she was saying? "Er...real present?"

"Come with me," she said cheerfully, leaping from his lap abruptly and dragging him up by his hand; Ron was acutely aware of his erection as two or three people laughed and pointed, and, hot-faced and mortified, he attempted to block his lower half from view by stepping up closer behind Lavender as she pulled him through the common room.

She giggled again, mistaking his actions for affection as she reached back, grabbing his other hand and placing them on her hips before leading him through the portrait hole; Ron, beyond eager to get out of the public setting in his present state, didn't protest as she led him down the spiraling staircase and to the floor below, but all he could think about was Hermione: She was still giving him the cold shoulder, but he'd hoped that over Christmas break that she might forgive him and that they could at least be friends again—he missed her, dammit, infuriating bossiness and all—but that wasn't bloody likely to happen as long as Lavender was around, snogging him at ever available opportunity (not that he'd put up too much a fight; his body and his ego liked the attention too bleeding much).

He thought about how he'd tried talking to Hermione when they'd first gotten back from the holidays the previous evening; in point of fact, for a brief moment he'd almost forgotten that they weren't speaking to one another, but now he was keenly aware of her absence, and since Harry was currently in one of Dumbledore's private lessons—he couldn't wait to find out what the Headmaster had shown him this time—all he had was Lavender to keep him company.

Not that his body was complaining, mind you, as she dragged him into the first unlocked classroom she came upon—which happened to be the very same one in which Hermione had attacked him now over a month ago—which gave him a considerable amount of unease; but then Lavender was on him, kissing him with renewed vigor as she backed him into the nearest desk. His hands were on her body instinctually as he kissed her back, attempting to shove images of Hermione's brown eyes aside as Lavender's fingers found the button of his trousers—

"Wait," he panted, tearing his mouth from hers, abruptly nervous as he remembered what she'd said about giving him his "real" present. It wasn't that he didn't want it—well, maybe his body

sure as fuck did, but his mind didn't, if that made any bloody sense, but Ron's head was spinning fast as his dick strained eagerly against his zipper, and he didn't really know what he wanted: He both wanted her and yet didn't want her, all in equal measure.

Really, though, while what he wanted on a physical level might be sex, there was no denying that, it wasn't with *her* that he wanted it: He wanted a certain bossy, know-it-all, bushy-haired, infuriating bookworm—not this bosomy blonde with the bony arse who evidently desired him and thought he was some sorta Quidditch god.

This is wrong, he told himself while his body screamed, *This is right*, and Lavender breathed, "I missed you, Won-Won" into his ear before she dropped to her knees in front of him...

Bloody fucking hell. He'd been wrong to think that she'd wanted to shag; he now understood, as her fingers tugged down his zip and then touched him through his pants—his hips jerked at the contact—that she wanted to...holy fuck. She wanted to do something to him that he'd never thought in his wildest, dirtiest fantasies that any bird might willingly do...well, to *him*...

As soon as it was over, and Lavender was leaning back on her haunches, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, the door flew open, and Ron stumbled backward, almost tripping over his trousers and pants in his haste to pull them up:

There, standing in the doorway and looking wilder, more infuriated than he'd ever seen her, lit wand held imposingly aloft, was Hermione.

oOo

It was getting a bit late when Hermione decided to call it a night and pack up her books; her eyes were bleary, and it was next to impossible to focus on her schoolwork, as an image of Lavender screeching, "Won-Won!" and throwing herself into Ron's arms played itself in a continuous loop in her mind.

It wasn't quite after-hours, but she didn't exactly fancy going back to the common room and witnessing Ron practically shagging in public his favorite member of the Rack Pack—as she'd come to think of the group of women that he fancied—and she doubted that Harry was out of his meeting with Dumbledore anyway; she therefore decided to patrol the corridors for mischief-makers and to remind students that it was getting close to curfew, never mind that it wasn't technically her night to patrol. (However, if she wanted to make Head Girl next year, she knew that taking the initiative would always cast her in a favorable light.)

After a half an hour of patrolling, of peering into classrooms and checking broom cupboards and hidden alcoves, Hermione had broken up four hot-and-heavy couples (thankfully, none of them were Ron and Lavender), confiscated one Fanged Frisbee, and stopped two younger students from vandalizing a priceless oil painting on the third floor. She'd deducted house points with more ardor than she might normally have employed, fuelled by her continued rage at Ron as she thought about how, for the very first time since she'd started at Hogwarts, she'd dreaded coming back after Christmas break.

A very large part of her had desired to hide out in her home, where her mother and father adored her, and they, at least, wouldn't break her heart; she'd even entertained fantasies of purposely missing the Floo back to Hogwarts. What if she'd just stayed in her childhood bedroom, surrounded by the comforting relics of a simpler time?

Of course, Hermione Granger was nothing if not practical, and so she'd dismissed such childish whims, held her chin high, and stepped into that fireplace; she'd left her parents with not a clue that their only daughter was in such a state of distress over the boy that they'd allowed her to visit

on several occasions the last few years—including a good portion of the previous summer.

On that thought, she made her way back to Gryffindor Tower. However, as she neared the spiraling staircase, she accidentally kicked something, which went skidding across the floor, coming to a halt in front of the closed classroom door several feet away; her eyes following the mystery object's path, she saw that it was a chocolate frog, still in its wrapper.

Frowning as she realized that behind that particular door was the classroom where Ron had dragged Lavender the day her world had come crashing around her, she walked over to pick up the chocolate—and that's when she heard it: A nauseatingly familiar giggle, issuing from behind the closed door.

Hermione froze, her heart racing in her chest as she silently deliberated on whether she should check the classroom, or if she should just continue up the stairs and pretend she hadn't heard anything; she knew that she might be ill by what she discovered, if she'd heard who she thought she'd heard, but at the same time her innate curiosity wouldn't allow her to simply ignore it.

She had to know, even if she felt the need to bleach her eyes and her brain afterward. *Don't let it be them, don't let it be them*, she silently prayed to whatever deity would listen.

Steeling her resolve, she blasted the door open before she could change her mind—and, unsurprisingly, but nevertheless nauseatingly, by the light of her wand she saw the back of a familiar blonde head, kneeling on the floor in front of none other than Ron Weasley: His trousers were around his ankles, and he stumbled as he tried to pull them up, shock and horror registered on his face as his eyes locked on hers.

At that moment, Hermione saw red.

Chapter 4: Blow by Blow

Chapter Four: Blow by Blow

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This chapter is set between the events of HBP Chapter Seventeen: A Sluggish Memory, and Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

oOo

Ron froze as soon as he'd regained his balance, holding his trousers up with one hand and fumbling to button them up while gripping the desk behind him with his other; on the floor in front of him, Lavender's head whipped toward the door as if in slow motion, spotting Hermione as she staggered to her feet.

There was a terrible, lingering, pregnant moment that seemed to expand and swell like a balloon, while Hermione merely stared at him, ignoring Lavender altogether, something that could only be described as malevolence brewing behind her eyes: There was unmistakable, overwhelming hurt and confusion there, but mostly there was a rage he'd never seen—at least not to that extreme extent—and Ron got the distinct impression that something had snapped inside her.

Even as he registered his own shock, mortification, and horror, Hermione seemed to come to some sort of decision, and he continued to stand frozen, waiting with bated breath to see what she would do as his pulse thundered in his ears; and then she strode toward him as time again seemed to flow in slow-motion, yet despite this phenomenon Ron somehow didn't have time to flinch away from the fierce, wild expression on her face as she raised her palm that wasn't clutching her wand, continuing to ignore Lavender as she had eyes only for Ron—

The blow struck him full across the face in an explosion of pain in his temple and a ringing in his ear.

"Hey!" Lavender shouted in protest, but he barely had time to register this because Hermione had reached her arm back again and struck him once more; unwilling to lay a hand on her even to defend himself, Ron merely raised his arms up to shield his face as she continued to deliver blow after shattering blow, a part of himself thinking that he deserved this, that he'd earned her wrath...

He was vaguely aware of Lavender sprinting from the room—Ron was pretty sure she didn't have her wand on her—as he began backing up blindly, bowing his head low and thinking wildly that Hermione could sure hit for such a small person as she fired insults at him, punctuating each one with a smack, most of which landed on his forearms, which continued to guard his face and head.

Even as he experienced a surge of guilt and remorse over what he'd done and what Hermione had walked in on, he couldn't stop his anger: It's not like he'd given her an invitation, was it? It was her own bloody fault she'd seen what she'd seen, and so he said as much—which only further fuelled the flame, sending her into a frenzied state as she now sobbed on top of everything else, looking quite mad as her hair seemed to crackle with electricity. Ron was genuinely beginning to fear for his life when suddenly—

"MISS GRANGER! THAT IS *QUITE* ENOUGH!"

Professor McGonagall was striding toward them in her dressing gown, looking both livid and shocked by her star pupil's behavior as she sent up a silent Shield Charm, which erupted

powerfully between Ron and Hermione, sending the latter skidding to her arse.

Hermione, seeming to come to herself, wheeled around, still looking quite deranged as she clamored to her feet and McGonagall stopped next to her; over the professor's shoulder, Ron saw Lavender peering timidly into the classroom.

"Miss Granger, I demand to know what this is all about at once!" McGonagall said sharply as Hermione visibly trembled in rage and—Ron thought he recognized—shame. "When Miss Brown informed me that you were assaulting Mr. Weasley, I assumed that she was either lying or mistaken, but I daresay that the evidence speaks for itself—you, one of my own prefects and the top contender for the position of Head Girl!"

The Head of Gryffindor House looked possibly more severe than Ron had ever seen her, and he couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for Hermione—even though she'd just tried to kill him—as she hung her head.

"Speak," McGonagall barked abruptly, looking between her three students with a hawk's penetrating gaze. "Someone tell me what started this...altercation."

"Well, you see," Ron began, "I—well—er—"

"I was doing my prefect rounds," Hermione said over him, loudly, "and I came across Lavender and Ron engaged in...activities unbecoming of representatives of the House of Gryffindor, not to mention in violation of about a dozen school rules...and I might have...overreacted a bit." She turned red at that last part as she stared at the floor, and McGonagall stared first at Hermione and then between Ron and Lavender.

A full minute must have passed in which Ron felt like his heart was going to beat itself right out of his chest before she finally said, "Miss Brown, go up to bed. Tomorrow I shall inform you of your detention schedule and send an owl to your parents, but for now I wish to speak to my prefects alone."

"Yes, Professor," Lavender said in a shaky voice before scampering off.

"You two, come with me," McGonagall barked the moment Lavender had disappeared, and Ron jumped slightly as he followed Hermione and McGonagall, the latter of whom had turned on her heel and marched away like a general leading her troops—or what Ron imagined it to be like, seeing as there were no real Wizarding armies.

When they'd reached her spacious and orderly office, Ron and Hermione sat next to each other as McGonagall took her place in her wingback chair facing them across her desk, looking stern; he chanced a glance at Hermione out of the corner of his eye, but she was staring resolutely into space, a stony expression on her reddened face. A sliver of guilt caused his insides to writhe as he remembered what she'd walked in on.

"You two do realize," McGonagall began curtly, "that not only is it my right to strip you of your titles, but it is my duty as well? Weasley," she added sharply, and Ron startled again as he faced her. "Do you deny Miss Granger's accusations about the...activities you were engaging in with Miss Brown on school property?"

Ron swallowed hard, again shooting a nervous glance at Hermione, but she continued to doggedly ignore him, a vein now throbbing in her lovely, swanlike throat. "No, ma'am," he said after clearing his throat, turning back to face McGonagall.

"Thank you for your honesty," she said, surprising him, "but rest assured that should you and

Miss Brown prove incapable or unwilling to conduct yourselves in a dignified, appropriate manner while on school property and during school-related outings, that not only will you be stripped of your title as prefect, but you will be expelled from this school. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Ron replied automatically, his voice several octaves higher than usual.

"Like Miss Brown, you are to serve a series of detentions—separate from her, of course, and I'm to hear of no complaints should they happen to coincide with Quidditch practice. If I do, you will lose that privilege as well. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Excellent. You're dismissed, Weasley. I shall be sending an owl to your parents in the morning to inform them of the nature of your offense and your corresponding punishment."

Ron left with a heavy heart and a Quaffle in his stomach, thinking that a Howler from his mum was the very least of his concerns...

oOo

As he slunk from the room, throwing a woeful glance in her direction that she steadfastly ignored, Hermione clung to the last shred of her dignity and self-control, willing herself not to break down again; she was already so ashamed that she'd been reduced to such a state, and that McGonagall, of all people, had seen her like that, that she didn't think she might ever recover from the strength of her mortification, shock, and rage.

To make matters as absolutely dour as conceivably possible, she couldn't get the scene she'd had the misfortune to stumble upon out of her head, but Ron had been right, hadn't he? It was her own fault; she had known that it was *them* behind that door, and she wasn't naïve enough to think that all Ron and Lavender ever got up to was snogging.

If only she'd looked the other way... If only she'd just kept going up that staircase...

Her curiosity wouldn't have been satisfied, but at least she wouldn't currently be sitting in Professor McGonagall's office, reduced to a state of humiliation and raw, bitter emotion. And to think that Hermione prided herself on her sound, ever-dependable logic and reason, when in truth she'd always been quite emotionally vulnerable—a weakness she had worked to cover up with a great amount of difficulty, like it was an ugly, shameful facet of her personality; but, no matter how great her effort, sometimes the stronger of her emotions just came bursting through the carefully constructed exterior she had worked so hard to erect, immovable, unstoppable under the proper stimuli.

She had wanted to hurt Ron, and she might have done so had she been a more physically powerful person—and that thought scared her more than she was willing to admit.

"Miss Granger," McGonagall began, her voice breaking through the silence-filled room, but not unkindly. "Hermione."

Hermione's eyes focused on her Head of House's at the sound of her given name, and she bit her lip to stop herself from bursting into tears at the sympathy in the elder witch's expression and in her voice.

"You physically attacked Mr. Weasley," McGonagall continued, again not unkindly. "If the situation had been reversed, and I had walked in on him assaulting *you*, what do you think that the appropriate course of action should have been?"

"Expulsion," Hermione replied immediately, her voice devoid of emotion; at that moment she felt nothing but fatigue. "And then...you should alert Magical Law Enforcement. I don't expect to be treated any differently because I'm female; I attacked Ron, I'm of age and he isn't, and double-standards shouldn't apply."

McGonagall's lips quirked up ever so slightly, as if amused by her response, which only served to annoy Hermione that she wasn't being taken seriously. "Somehow, I doubt that Mr. Weasley wishes to press charges—"

"You didn't ask him," Hermione cut in stubbornly.

"And as for expulsion," McGonagall continued as if she hadn't heard her student, "I do not believe that that is going to happen this time, Miss Granger, but I must press upon you the seriousness of attacking other students—whether by Magical means or otherwise. If I hear of another such incident, I'm afraid my hands will be tied. Not only will you lose all prospects of becoming Head Girl next year, but the school may have no choice but to expel you, since violence of any kind isn't tolerated—particularly not by a prefect, whom we depend upon to uphold and to help enforce school rules." There was a pause before she added, "However, seeing as your behavior has in the past been, for the most part, exemplary, you will be receiving the same punishment as Miss Brown and Mr. Weasley: a series of detentions and a letter home."

"Yes, Professor." Hermione honestly wasn't certain whether she was relieved or annoyed: A part of her longed with all of her heart to return home, crawl into her childhood bed, and never return to Hogwarts. That same part of her longed to leave Magical society altogether—

Which was exactly why she wouldn't. Hermione had always had an ironclad will, emotionally vulnerable or not, and she was determined that she would no longer allow her emotions and her heart to be enslaved by Ron I-Do-As-I-Please Weasley.

McGonagall was regarding her once more with that penetrating, intelligent gaze, and Hermione got the distinct impression that the formidable witch was reading her thoughts—which she very well could be, she realized.

"Would you care for some tea, Hermione?" Professor McGonagall asked, again addressing her informally as her voice completely lost its sternness, replaced by a sort of maternal edge, which had Hermione almost bursting into tears once more as she thought of her own mother.

"Please," she replied, her voice thick with unshed tears, and with a wave of McGonagall's wand, a tray containing a teapot, two teacups, and a tin of biscuits appeared on the elder witch's desk. "Thank you," she said gratefully as she reached out and picked up one of the little piping cups, taking a sip.

"Hermione," McGonagall said again, and she was surprised by how comforting she found the professor's use of her given name; it was rather nice. "Would you like to talk about it?"

The younger witch's hands trembled, the china clinking violently as she placed the little cup and saucer back on the desk, again attempting to stop her lips from quivering with the strain of holding back her tears—but it was ultimately a losing battle: Hermione began sobbing, the tears falling down her cheeks unencumbered as McGonagall slowly but silently rose, walked around the desk, and held the distressed, sobbing girl in her arms until she'd quieted.

oOo

He trudged his way up to his dormitory, his step weary and forced as his body shook with a

convolution of emotions; his only solace was that at least it was late, so his chances of being forced to interact with anyone were slim. Once Ron had reached his destination, he stopped off at his bed long enough to grab his toiletry kit and tracksuit pants—he glanced at Harry's bed briefly, wondering with a stab of curiosity what Dumbledore had shown him tonight—before making a beeline to the bathroom, stripping, and turning on the shower.

As he stood beneath the Ever-Replenishing hot water, desiring nothing more than to cleanse his body of the scent of Lavender's skin and nauseating flowery perfume, he reflected on his varying emotions individually, letting out a derisive snort at the idea that Hermione had once accused him of having the emotional range of a teaspoon. It just seemed so bleeding ironic, given that right now he was experiencing so many things he felt like he might literally explode:

Resentment: He resented Lavender and the stupid way she screeched "Won-Won!" every time she saw him. He resented the fact that she'd taken advantage of his weakness: She'd known exactly what she was doing by parading those big tits in front of him and rubbing herself against his crotch, and she'd known bloody well that he was too weak to resist her when she'd pulled him into that classroom. (In all fairness, though, Ron knew he was being harsh to blame her completely, but at that moment he didn't give a rat's fart.) To make matters worse, he couldn't even chuck her now, because that would just make him look like he'd used her—which he had, he thought uncomfortably. If not for her body, since she'd initiated most of the touching and whatnot, he'd at least used her to stroke his ego.

Anger: He was mostly angry at himself for being such a weak git and letting his hormones control him and for not chucking Lavender before things got so far—he'd been cruel to both Lavender and Hermione for not breaking it off—but he also felt anger at Hermione for not making her intentions clearer in the first place. Yeah, she'd invited him to that stupid party, but he'd had no real reason to think she'd meant as more than friends. Merlin's saggy left bollock, was he supposed to have read her bleeding mind? The only blatant damn thing she'd done was set those birds on him, but by that point he'd been too fucking happy that he'd found someone that seemed to bloody appreciate him that he'd tried telling himself that Hermione only wanted him now that someone else did; that part, he reckoned, was his own stupidity, but there you have it.

Regret: He couldn't take back what he'd done with Lavender, and he couldn't take back that Hermione had seen it—a thought that made him wanna vomit—even as he tried to reason with himself that he hadn't done anything wrong: So he'd let his girlfriend give him a blowjob. Letting a girl polish your knob wasn't against the bloody law, was it? What the bloody fuck had she expected them to be doing in there? Baking scones?

No matter what he tried to tell himself, though, it didn't stop the most prevailing emotion of all:

Guilt: He'd hurt Hermione, knowingly, again and again, but this was too much; he'd never be able to erase that look on her face when she'd found them together from his mind: All that rage, with the hurt and confusion mixed in. Ron had caused that in his selfishness and stupidity, and he could never take that back.

As he stepped out of the shower and efficiently dried himself with his wand, he mused resentfully that Hermione deserved so much better than a stupid prick like him.

Chapter 5: A Brewing Storm

Chapter Five: A Brewing Storm

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This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

oOo

She rubbed her temples, attempting ineffectually to stifle the headache that had developed due to the exertion required to not replay again and again the scene she'd unfortunately walked in on the previous night. Yet, despite her best efforts, the sight repeated in an incessant, never-ending loop in her mind: the image of Lavender Brown kneeling on the floor in front of Ron; Ron, with his trousers around his ankles in the instant before he caught sight of Hermione, his—

Hermione warmed at the unrelenting image that had taken root in her mind's eye, her emotions a confusing, jumbled mixture of mortification, humiliation, jealousy, rage, and desire. She felt disgusted with herself that she was still capable of experiencing even the minutest degree of desire for him after knowing that he had allowed *her* to do *that* to him—the thought positively sickened her—but that couldn't be helped.

Maybe they had already done more than that, she realized; maybe they had already actually had sex, a thought that made Hermione's stomach churn. She felt robbed of all of the "firsts" she had always envisioned herself experiencing with Ron, but now all of those fanciful, girlish desires were tainted and cheapened, weren't they? Clearly, he had no problem getting off with the first promiscuous, large-breasted girl to fawn over him.

Who was this person masquerading as Ron Weasley, and why had pragmatic, levelheaded Hermione Granger fallen for him to begin with?

As she stood in the abandoned snow-covered courtyard, ignoring her own violent shivering while watching the snow swirling in random patterns, she pondered that question with all of the concentration she might afford a particularly complicated potion recipe, never mind that she had vowed to herself just last night in McGonagall's office that she would no longer allow her heart and her emotions to be enslaved by Ron Weasley. Even for Hermione, however, with all of her rationalizations, that was a task that was proving much easier said than done.

She recalled how she'd opened up to Professor McGonagall about her feelings for Ron—which hadn't been an easy thing for her to do, but it had been prudent nonetheless. She then considered what McGonagall had advised her about teenage boys and maturity, suggesting that Ron, quite clearly, wasn't ready to be in a grown-up relationship, and that Hermione's options were that she could either choose to let him go, or wait patiently for him to grow up. "Either way, Hermione," Professor McGonagall had added, "you must find a productive means by which to manage your emotions. I would suggest, for the time being, that you concentrate on keeping yourself as healthy and as content as possible—even if letting him go is the avenue by which that task must be accomplished."

It was simple but logical advice, and it was nothing that Hermione hadn't already known deep down, but the problem was that she didn't know how to wait patiently for Ron to mature; nor did she believe that she was truly capable of letting him go.

With a surge of acute frustration, she pondered why she couldn't have fallen for Harry instead of

Ron. After all, by all outward appearances Harry did seem the most viable candidate for Hermione's affections between her two male friends, did he not? Though moody and withdrawn at times, he was kind and perceptive; he was rarely rude to her and never insulting; he was certainly easy on the eye, what with his straight nose, proportional features, and piercing green eyes. In addition, he was a wonderful friend—well, not always wonderful, she conceded to herself, since he at times turned a blind eye to her emotional strife, but, then, that served Hermione right for choosing boys for friends, she supposed: They weren't particularly good with talking about feelings and the like, were they?

Nonetheless, there was, quite frankly, no romantic chemistry between herself and Harry; their relationship was more akin to the platonic nature of siblings, since the thought of kissing or doing more with him felt...well, wrong—and, yes, she had considered it: A girl didn't maintain a close friendship with a boy who wasn't blood-related without considering that particular possibility at one point or another—and she was reasonably confident that Harry felt the same way about her, since he'd never expressed the remotest romantic interest.

Of course, Hermione certainly wasn't one to believe that chemistry was everything in a relationship; companionship, in her opinion, was much more significant, since romantic chemistry often faded over time, so one needed to ensure that the person that he or she chose as a longtime partner was someone with which he or she could actually converse. Regardless, however, she was essentially still just a young woman: She craved fire, passion, and, quite simply, Harry did not stir those emotions in her—Ron did. He always had, even if she had not recognized those feelings for what they were as a young girl. (Although, admittedly, passion wasn't always necessarily a positive emotion, going off of her reaction to what she'd witnessed last night.)

Besides which, knowing how Ginny felt about Harry, it was for the best that Hermione didn't have romantic inclinations toward her best friend.

"There you are—I've been looking for you everywhere!" a familiar voice intruded on her thoughts. "Why weren't you at breakfast this morning? Blimey, it's freezing out here."

And speak of the devil, she thought as Harry appeared at her side, tucking his chin into himself to protect his face against the cold; Hermione had been so caught up in her thoughts that she hadn't even noticed his approach.

"Are you all right, Hermione?"

"Fine," she replied automatically, staring resolutely at the white, swirling flakes. She would never tell him about what had happened last night; it was simply too painful and humiliating to discuss, especially since he was still friends with Ron. As always, Harry retained a neutral stance.

"If you say so," he said slowly, clearly unconvinced, but he didn't persist, which she was grateful for. "Anyway, I've wanted to tell you about what Dumbledore showed me last night, but I didn't see you at breakfast, and you ran out after Defense..." At the reminder, Hermione felt somewhat startled by the fact that in the midst of all the drama with Ron, she'd completely forgotten about Harry's meeting with Dumbledore.

She listened with rapt attention as Harry told her about how Tom Riddle, at the age of sixteen, had murdered his father and paternal grandparents before forcing his poor, deranged uncle, Morfin Gaunt, into taking the blame for the murders; then he explained about Slughorn's tampered memory in which the young Voldemort had questioned the Potions professor about something called Horcruxes.

"He must be determined to hide what really happened if Dumbledore couldn't get it out of him," she said reasonably once he'd explained about how Dumbledore had assigned Harry the task of

retrieving the true version of the memory from Professor Slughorn. "Horcruxes..." she added thoughtfully, searching her mental stores of information that she'd accumulated over the years, completely oblivious to her soaking wet socks and ice-cold feet, a result of the fact that she was standing ankle-deep in snow. "*Horcruxes*... I've never even heard of them."

"You haven't?" The disappointment was evident in his face, but that couldn't be helped. After all, it wasn't as if she was a walking encyclopedia, for goodness sake.

"They must be really advanced Dark Magic, or why would Voldemort have wanted to know about them?" she mused aloud. "I think it's going to be difficult to get the information, Harry, you'll have to be very careful about how you approach Slughorn, think out a strategy..."

"Ron reckons I should just hang back after Potions this afternoon..."

At the mention of Ron, she experienced a flash of combined pain and rage, which she didn't bother to hide: "Oh, well, if *Won-Won* thinks that, you'd better do it. After all, when has *Won-Won*'s judgment ever been faulty?"

"Hermione, can't you—?"

"*No!*"

She stormed away at once, lest she break down in front of him, heading back into the warmth of the castle and ducking into the nearest girls' bathroom in order to dry her sopping-wet feet and robes. As she peeled off her outer layers of clothing with trembling hands, she was unable to stop her mounting, albeit irrational, irritation at Harry that he could expect her to just forgive Ron for his continued behavior. She knew that Ron knew exactly what he was doing to her, and she knew that *Harry* knew that Ron knew exactly what he was doing to her, but was Harry on *Ron's* case about making up? Did he pull Ron aside and tell him what a prat he was being?

No, not bloody likely, she decided as she angrily yanked off her shoes and socks, stepping onto the cold stone floor as she dried her clothing with her wand.

Even if Ron broke it off with Lavender, Hermione knew that she might never forgive him—even if the only thing he had truly done wrong, other than rubbing his "relationship" with *Lav-Lav* in her face, was not return her feelings. That's what it boiled down to, wasn't it? Hermione was angry at Ron for not returning her feelings and for choosing a superficial fling with a shallow girl over her.

As she finished redressing in her newly warmed and dried robes, she again pondered her inexplicable feelings for Ron Weasley: Feelings of undeniable affection for him had begun to stir as far back as first year, when he had fought a troll for her; in second year, those feelings had cemented a bit more when he had stood up to Malfoy for calling her a Mudblood and had consequently ended up belching up slugs for defending her honor.

Over the years, despite their frequent rows and misunderstandings, she had seen enough of Ron to know that, for all his faults, he was good and loyal at heart. Despite his deep-seated insecurities, he loved his family and friends and would fight for them no matter the cost.

She had been witness to Ron's sweet side on numerous occasions, especially during the summers when Hermione spent time with him before Harry's inevitable arrival. Particularly this past summer—at least when Fleur hadn't been around to suck all of the attention to herself—he had seemed to smile at her more often than usual, to touch her a bit more frequently, if only subtly: a hand pressed lightly against the small of her back as they walked in the garden, laughing as he chattered at her about Quidditch and the like; his body a bit too close to hers as they peeled sprouts

together at the kitchen sink, while he tried to make her laugh by sticking sprouts up his nose; his knee touching hers as they sat cross-legged together on his bed, Hermione submersed in a book while Ron flipped through Quidditch magazines, stealing the occasional glance at each other... It had all seemed a little too friendly to be merely friendly.

As tears threatened to rise in her eyes once more, she wondered what had happened, and who was this selfish prat who was loyal to nothing but his own raging hormones that had replaced the boy that she loved?

Quite simply, she missed him.

Before she could ponder an answer to her question, the lavatory door banged open and a group of giggling fourth-year Ravenclaw girls flooded inside, intruding on her privacy.

Rinsing and drying her face hastily and without glancing at her plain, make-up-less reflection, Hermione hefted up her book bag, slung it over her shoulder, and exited swiftly. As she ducked her head down as to avoid having to exchange pleasantries with anyone in the corridors, she made her way to the dungeons for Potions, dreading the prospect of having to share a table with Ron with even more zeal than usual.

Hermione was tired of being miserable. She considered that perhaps it was time to focus on trying to be "healthy and content" again, just as Professor McGonagall had suggested.

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Weeks had passed since the start of term, and Hermione was still avoiding him—not that he blamed her; he was still embarrassed and ashamed when he thought about the look on her face that night when she'd literally caught him with his bloody trousers around his ankles and Lavender kneeling in front of him. Bloody hell, could there be anything more humiliating than being caught practically getting a bloody BJ from your girlfriend by the girl you were secretly mad about?

Every morning and every evening Ron scanned the common room for Hermione's face, but she seemed to be spending all of her free time in the library these days. He'd never before realized how much of a comfort her bossy, often mental presence was to him, but it just didn't feel, well...*right* without her around to tease until she huffed up in mock-indignation, or to nag him about his homework. And if prefect meetings and the required rounds weren't already a bore and a waste of time, they were now downright unpleasant thanks to her acting all haughty toward him when they were forced to interact and ignoring him the rest the bloody time.

Ron had actually snuck into the library to spy on her a couple of times, hiding behind a shelf and peering through the dusty books that she loved so much in order to watch her study: That was the only time he ever saw her with her guard down these days, the only time she seemed relaxed, the worry lines between her eyes all smoothed out and her lower lip caught between her teeth. Her hair was pulled back in a loose bun, and it was all frizzy and curly around her face; her skin was almost translucent, her summer tan having long faded away, but it was still so smooth and flawless. He wanted to touch her, because he knew from memory how fucking soft she was.

She really was beautiful. He wished that he could tell her that without worrying about getting his bollocks hexed off. He wished he could tell her that he'd do anything to make things right again, but he just didn't bloody know how.

As it stood, Ron was too much of a bleeding coward to break things off with Lavender, especially since he felt guilty on top of everything else about what he'd done with her and the fact that he didn't even really care about her, and she seemed to really fancy him a whole bloody lot. If *Witch Weekly* had a Prat of the Year award, then he bloody deserved it.

At least he'd managed to control his treasonous body and hormones pretty well; as long as he avoided letting her corner him he was good. A part of him was also grateful that Hermione wasn't hanging out in the common room, just 'cause he didn't fancy letting her continue to witness when Lavender decided she fancied wrapping herself around him like a smothering blanket. As far as mealtimes went, he ate as quickly as he could these days, keeping food shoved in his mouth so as to avoid having Lavender's tongue shoved in there instead. (Plus, he feared McGonagall's wrath.)

On the upside, he had his birthday and a trip to Hogsmeade to look forward to, even if he hadn't quite worked out how he'd ditch Lavender; he reckoned he'd tell her that Harry and some of the blokes wanted to take him out to celebrate—which was sorta the truth. She'd be disappointed, but he knew her well enough to know she wouldn't question it.

In the meantime, he had his schoolwork to occupy himself. (It was a helluva lotta work without Hermione's help.) Plus he had Quidditch, Apparition lessons, and then there was Harry's new obsession with tracking Malfoy on the Marauder's Map, which Ron reckoned had become a bit unhealthy.

Oh yeah, and then there were his stupid detentions.

oOo

Hermione put her absolute all into focusing on herself and forcing Ron to the backdrop of her thoughts, even if his presence never abandoned her entirely. It proved to be quite a challenge not to think about how Ron and Lavender's relationship might have progressed in the previous weeks. (*They could be engaged by now*, she thought disdainfully, more than once.) Nevertheless, she threw herself into her schoolwork and prefect duties with renewed zest, concentrated on her Apparition lessons, and avoided the common room like the plague.

In addition, she'd made it her mission in life to discover everything she could about Horcruxes, despite her annoyance with Harry and his extra "help" in Potions, but to no avail: After combing practically every book in the library, including the Restricted Section, she'd come across exactly one tiny reference that had been infuriatingly unhelpful. She'd made a mental note to write Flourish and Blotts; if there was a book on the subject, then surely the Diagon Alley bookstore either had one in stock or else could place a special order with the publisher.

Meanwhile, Harry was biding his time before making another attempt at questioning Slughorn, lest it result as disastrously as his first had. However, it appeared as if Harry's plan to regain the Potion professor's trust wasn't working out so well, since apparently he had stopped having dinner parties: She and Harry agreed that he was deliberately avoiding giving Harry another opportunity to interrogate him.

Every Tuesday evening, Hermione dutifully and uncomplainingly served her detentions, which were different every week depending on who needed a job done: So far she had organized files for McGonagall, planted self-fertilizing shrubs for Sprout, tended the pumpkin patch for Hagrid, organized the student store cupboard and cleaned cauldrons for Slughorn, and, disgustingly, scraped chewing gum from the undersides of desks for Snape—without protective gloves.

On that particular Tuesday, Hermione was sitting in the library following a quick, insufficient dinner; since she had no desire to see Ron whenever she could avoid him, she usually grabbed whatever hand foods were proffered and ate on her way to the library.

Up until moments ago she had been studying, as usual, but her attention was currently captivated by the late-February rain outside the long, thin window. It was ominously darker than usual for this time of the evening, and Hermione could sense the encroaching storm; it felt as if something was brewing in her blood as surely as that storm brewed outside the castle walls.

She had always loved storms, ever since she was a young child, and she held a particular memory of being at her grandmother's house during severe weather. While her cousins had hidden from the thunder and lightning in fear, it had piqued an undeniable excitement in Hermione.

Actually, that was her first memory of ever having used accidental magic: The electricity had gone out, and Nana had found some candles but had been unable to locate anything with which to light them. When little Tommy and Caitlyn had begun to cry, Hermione had, quite literally, willed the wicks to light.

At first, as the others gasped in surprise and shock, Hermione hadn't understood that she had done it, but then she had noticed other, inexplicable things occurring around her...

"Hermione? Sorry to interrupt, but McGonagall asked me to give you this."

Hermione glanced about, slightly surprised to see Demelza Robbins at her elbow, holding out an envelope toward her.

"Oh, thank you, Demelza," she said absently as she took it and removed the parchment from the sleeve before unfolding it. Reading quickly, she saw that she was to go to Filch's office at precisely eight o'clock. Feeling somewhat wary about what Filch might have in store for her, she replaced the parchment in its envelope with a heavy sigh and resumed her studying.

After finally completing her rather taxing Arithmancy essay, Hermione sat up straight and rubbed her sore back one-handed, feeling relatively pleased by her work. Of course, she had a week before it was due, and she planned on revising it for perfection at least twice more...

Once she had returned all of the borrowed books to their proper place on the shelves and gathered up her own property, storing it neatly in her book bag, it was ten 'til eight. She said goodnight to Madam Pince—who merely scowled at her—and made the journey to Filch's office.

When she at long last turned a corner in the dark, dank-smelling passageway, rapidly approaching the caretaker's office, she stopped dead at the sight before her, her heart thudding wildly in her chest as her breath quickened:

Leaning against the wall outside the closed door, one hand shoved casually in the pocket of his trousers while he smoothed down his bright ginger hair with the other, was Ron.

Chapter 6: Wildfire

Chapter Six: Wildfire

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This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

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"Do you have to go, Won-Won?" Lavender crooned into his ear; leaning in closer, she added in a singsong whisper, "If you stay, I'll make it worth your while."

His ears warming, feeling torn between extreme annoyance and sudden, traitorous arousal, Ron plied her arms from around his neck and physically forced her off of his lap as he stood up. "It's *detention*, Lav, McGonagall will have my bollocks if I don't go."

Games of Exploding Snaps, conversations, and studying ensued around them as Ron and Lavender's conversation went unnoticed, the whole of Gryffindor House having become long accustomed to the couple's nauseating public displays of affection—never mind that for the past several weeks, their "relationship" had been rather one-sided, a fact that seemed to be completely lost on Lavender.

Glancing around, he looked for Harry to help bail him out, but it looked like his best mate had snuck up to the dorm while Lavender had been attempting to box Ron's tonsils with her tongue. (With a surge of shame, he acknowledged to himself that he hadn't exactly been fighting her off.)

"But your detentions are on *Wednesdays*," she was saying with a sulk, her arms crossed over her chest, which made her appear very much like a petulant little girl—a little girl with bigger-than-average tits. "And I know for a fact that today is *Tuesday*."

Learned the days of the week, did you? Good for you! Instead of saying what he was really thinking, though, he let out a heavy sigh and said, rather more impatiently than he'd intended, "Like I already told you, McGonagall moved it to today—"

"Hermione Granger's detentions are also on Tuesdays. Did you know that?"

Ron stared at her, registering the insecurity in her big blue eyes, and, for about the millionth time, he felt a sting of guilt for drawing this thing out with her. Also, he did know that Hermione's detentions were on Tuesdays—even though he hadn't thought of it until Lavender mentioned it—but he hadn't known that Lavender knew.

For the first time, he considered that maybe she wasn't actually as thick as she acted.

"Look, if I don't get going, I'm gonna be late," he said, attempting to insert gentleness into his voice and knowing that he failed miserably; to try to make up for it, he leaned forward and hugged her awkwardly, but when she moved in to kiss him he turned his head, effectively causing her lips to land on his cheek. "Anyway, I'll see you later," he added as he hastily pulled away from her and walked to the portrait hole without a glance back. He knew he was being a coward, but he didn't want to see the hurt in her eyes, which would only fuel his ever-increasing shame.

Merlin's saggy left bollock, he hated this whole bloody situation: On top of feeling guilty about Hermione and wanting to make things right with her, he felt bloody guilty about Lavender as well—but he didn't wanna think about Lavender.

As he made his way down to Filch's office, he felt both nervous as fuck and exhilarated by the prospect of spending detention with Hermione. If his hunch turned out to be right—What the hell was McGonagall thinking, anyway?—it was bound to be awkward as hell, and he might wanna guard his bollocks, but just the thought of having an opportunity to spend time alone with her, whether she hated him or not, made his heart soar.

When he arrived at the caretaker's office, it was to find the door closed with light spilling from the crack underneath. He hesitated, wondering if he should knock or just wait; coming to a quick decision, he raised his fist and rapped on the heavy wood three times.

"Who is it?" Filch's irritated voice barked from behind the closed door.

"It's Ron Weasley."

"Who?"

"Ron Weasley? Professor McGonagall sent me for a detention?"

"Oh. Give me a bleedin' minute, then."

As Ron leaned against the wall to the right of the door, he heard a scraping noise and a heavy shuffling from inside the office like the git was rearranging furniture, but before he could think on it for too long, his eyes locked on a lone figure making her way up the corridor toward him: It was Hermione.

His heart sped up in that strange combination of exhilaration and nerves as their gazes met, and he watched her step falter, her eyes widening in obvious surprise at the sight of him. In the flickering light of the nearby torch, her features were softened and impossibly lovely to him, even as she turned her nose in the air haughtily, crossed her arms over her chest, and continued marching forward in a determined manner that Ron might have found amusing under different circumstances.

For a moment he thought she would continue with the silent treatment that had become the norm as of late—which was, in his opinion, far worse than her occasional snide comments in passing ("I expect your trainers are too small, Won-Won.")—but then Hermione stopped two feet in front of him and stared up at him with an expression that suggested that someone had set off a Dungbomb in the passageway.

"What are you doing here?" Her tone dripped venom, rivaling Draco Malfoy's when he was at his most spiteful.

"Same thing as you, I reckon—serving detention," he replied, trying to keep his voice even despite his hotly-burning ears and his pounding heart. Bloody hell, it was like he'd never spoken to Hermione before. But then, it had been months since they'd had an actual conversation, hadn't it? And the last time they'd really stood face-to-face, she was trying her best to beat him to a pulp.

Her eyes narrowed at him suspiciously: "Your detentions are on Wednesdays."

"How do you know?" he asked, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he could stop them, but before she could work up an appropriately biting response, the door was thrown open, and Filch stood in the doorway, glaring at the two students:

"You're the help what was sent me?" he grumbled, and when Ron and Hermione did nothing more than nod once and stare, he moved aside, ushering them in impatiently.

Stepping inside, Ron noted with some interest that Filch's desk and a filing cabinet had been moved to the far wall, revealing a previously hidden doorway, beyond which appeared to be some type of storage room: Ron glimpsed stacks of books, piles of what were definitely Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes products, phials containing mysterious liquids, and hundreds of various knickknacks.

"Right, then," Filch said, gesturing at the room, oblivious to the way the teens awkwardly avoided looking at each other. "This here's where I keep confiscated illegal items. It needs to be reorganized, and any dangerous items need to be separated and catalogued so I can turn 'em over to the Ministry. Any questions?"

"Yeah, why can't we just Vanish the lot of it?" Ron asked, which seemed to him to be the obvious solution.

Filch narrowed his eyes at him much like Hermione had done moments before: "You giving me cheek, boy?"

"No," Ron said quickly, "but how do we know what's dangerous?"

"Use your brains. Figure it out—and don't forget the protective gloves. And no magic!" The caretaker turned to go, but then he stopped abruptly as if remembering something crucial and turned back to face the students: "I've got too much work that needs doin' to babysit you lot, but you can be sure I'll be back to check on you, so no funny business—and if you steal anything, I'll know!" Without another word, he stalked from the office, Mrs. Norris following in his wake after casting her lamp-like gaze on them suspiciously.

Ron and Hermione were left alone; the ensuing tension was a tangible thing, the silence somehow louder than even their most heated row.

"Right," Ron finally said after clearing his throat, feeling the heat of Hermione's glare on the back of his head as he glanced around for the protective gloves Filch had mentioned, suddenly eager to occupy himself; his heart was still racing with that bizarre mixture of nerves and excitement.

He was alone with Hermione. *Bloody hell.*

A large part of him longed to race back to Gryffindor Tower and hide like the scared little boy that he was on the inside, but another part of him longed to stay right where he was at—even if that meant she started taking swings at him again.

Abruptly, something soft hit him in the back of the head, and, startled, Ron wheeled around, momentarily confused before spotting the gloves at his feet: She'd chunked them at him.

"Found the gloves," Hermione said without looking at him as she pulled on a pair of her own. "You looked like you were straining yourself, so a simple silent Summoning Charm was all it took." Before he could work up more than a good angry/embarrassed flush at her belittlement, she'd swept past him and into the small, cramped room. "We'd best get started," she added icily. "The sooner we're done here, the better." Her tone heavily implied that the sooner she got away from *him*, the better.

Following her into the room, he stared at her back as she picked up what appeared to be a perfume bottle and inspected it. "Fred and George's love potions," she muttered to herself, setting it back down and picking up another, similar bottle and placing it next to the first.

Ron turned away from her, staring at the shelves of junk helplessly, not knowing where to begin and feeling more than a bit hacked off by Hermione's attitude toward him, but what had he

expected? Her to throw her arms around him and declare him forgiven? *Yeah, right.* He'd as likely expect Snape to jump up and perform a belly dance in the middle of their next Defense lesson.

Reaching toward the nearest stack of rubbish, he picked up a funny-looking old box with weird etchings, turning it over in his hands as he tried to figure out how the bloody hell he was supposed to know whether the thing was "dangerous." Didn't Filch check everything he confiscated for Dark Magic?

When he heard Hermione muttering an incantation behind him, he turned to see that she had cleaned out a section of shelf already and had neatly placed on it several rows of bottles; currently, she was holding one and gently tapping it with her wand.

"Filch said no magic." He'd spoken without thinking, and the instant the words left his lips he winced at what a complete tit he sounded like. What the fuck was wrong with him, anyway?

"Since when do you care what Filch says?" she fired back without looking at him, continuing to tap her wand against the bottle. "For that matter, since when do you care about what anyone other than Ron Weasley wants?"

Something inside Ron snapped at her words, and, even though he knew in his heart what a complete prat he'd been, he'd be damned if he just bloody stood there and let her continue to string 'im up by his bollocks without a word in his own defense: It wasn't like she was completely innocent in this situation, was it? She'd played her own games with that McLaggen bloke, hadn't she? "Bloody hell, why don't you just come out already and say what you're really thinking? What exactly is at that's got your knickers in a twist?"

Immediately, Hermione huffed up, her hair seeming to crackle with electricity as she turned to face him fully in the cramped room: For such a small person, she could actually be quite intimidating, and Ron had to force himself not to take a step backward. "Don't play daft, Ron. You know exactly what's got my 'knickers in a twist,' as you so eloquently put it—but that's exactly what you wanted, isn't it? Well, congratulations on a job well done."

"So sure that I'm playing, are you? You're the one who's always treating me like I'm daft, so why don't you spell it out for me, then?"

She glared at him, her eyes narrowing dangerously as her wand hand twitched threateningly, but Ron held his ground, his own arms crossed defensively over his chest.

"Are you in love with Lavender Brown?"

Ron was floored by the question: Of all the things he might've expected to come out of her mouth, that was the very last. "Wh—what?"

"You heard me: Do you love her?" Despite the venom in her voice, the vulnerability behind her brown eyes was as plain as day, and he couldn't lie to Hermione. He wouldn't. At any rate, he'd rather gouge his own eyes out than declare love for Lavender Brown.

"No, of course not."

"*Of course not?*" she repeated, letting out a maniacal, derisive laugh as she pushed her hair out of her face. "What is it, then? The way she says 'Won-Won'? Her charming personality? Or perhaps she's simply too good a shag to chuck? Is that it?"

He gaped at her; if he hadn't been shocked by what she'd said before, then he certainly was now. "A good—?—Are you barking—?"

"Oh, please," she cut in scathingly, "as if the idea is really such a stretch of the imagination, given what I witnessed at the start of term. I expect I'll be hearing of your engagement any day now—unless, of course, you're simply *using* her, which wouldn't be so surprising, given that you've proven yourself to be shallow, selfish, controlled by your hormones—"

"What about you, then, huh?" he retorted, unable to stop himself from flaring up angrily as he closed the distance between them and stopped barely two inches short of her, glaring down at her. "What about Krum? Just friends, were you? And McLaggen? Did you really go out with that tosser 'cause you bloody fancied him, or were you just using him? A bit hypocritical of you, doncha think?"

"That's different, and you know it, Ron—I didn't lead Cormac on for *months*, did I? I went out with him *once* and actually ended up spending the entire evening hiding from him, and I haven't spoken a word to him since! The only thing he suffered was a bruised ego, and, let's face it, he needed to be taken down a notch. Besides, I wanted it to be *you*!" she all but screamed at him, tears springing to her eyes, and Ron experienced a rush of guilt that he'd crossed a line and actually made her cry—again. "One minute we're making plans to go to Slughorn's party together, and the next you're snogging that—that—"

"As friends," Ron interjected defensively, his voice faltering as doubt clouded his mind for the first time. "I didn't really bloody think you could mean more than that after I found out—I mean, you made it pretty bloody clear you think I'm rubbish at everything after Harry pretended to put the liquid luck in my drink, so what reason did I have to think you meant more than friends, Hermione? I can't read your bloody mind."

"And I can't read yours, either!—and I don't think you're rubbish at everything! Ron, *you* thought he'd put the liquid luck in there as well, so how could you fault *me* for thinking the same thing as you? And about the party, so instead of asking for clarification, your solution was to start snogging the first girl who offered herself to you on a silver platter?—Wait, after you found out what?"

"About you and Krum."

This time Hermione was the one to do the gaping, her chest rising and falling with every inhale and exhale through her parted lips. In spite of their row, he couldn't help but think how pretty she was when she was worked up like this, what with her cheeks all flushed and her bushy hair all wild-looking. "That's what this whole thing is about?" she finally said, her voice rising hysterically. "You're doing who-knows-what with Lavender Brown because of the fact that I *briefly* went out with Viktor Krum *two years ago* after you had every opportunity to ask me out but failed to do so?"

"Did you snog him?"

"We went out, Ron, what do you think? I was flattered because he was an older, popular boy who, for whatever reason, was interested in *me*, plain, bookish—"

"You lied to me!" he hurled at her, barely registering a word she'd said after the first part of her statement. "You said you were just friends!"

"*We were!*" she insisted irately, the tears now streaming down her face, but he was now too livid himself to feel any amount of guilt. "We only kissed a few times—it was hardly a 'serious relationship,' and the whole time I secretly wished it was—"

Crunch.

oOo

In the instant that she realized that she'd stepped on something that crunched underfoot, she also registered a sharp sting on her insole. Gasping in combined shock and pain, she lifted her foot, and, just before Ron caught her as she began to stumble, she recognized the shattered remains of the mysterious bottle that she'd been attempting to identify before she'd gotten caught up in her row with Ron.

As he hefted her into his arms—she was too surprised to protest—and carried her to the chair behind Filch's desk, Hermione caught sight of the spilled contents of the bottle, now fizzing and popping strangely on the stone floor.

Leaning back and peeling her shoe and sock off with trembling hands, she saw a lot of scarlet blood where a large shard of glass had cut into her foot—and, in the wound itself, something fizzed and bubbled, reminding her of the hydrogen peroxide her mum and dad used to treat minor cuts and abrasions.

"Don't suppose you found out what was in that bottle?" Ron said while leaning over her, looking grim as he stared at her foot. "C'mon, let's get you to Madam Pomfrey..."

As Ron bent down and wrapped his arm around her waist, preparing to help hoist her to a one-legged standing position, his calloused fingers skimmed her flesh, just beneath the hem of her jumper.

Hermione yelped at the contact, jerking away from him and falling hard on her bum as something that could only be described as feral sexual lust, purely, simply, and more powerful than anything she had previously experienced, coursed through her veins ferociously and with the potency of the strongest firewhisky; as she stared up at Ron, at those full, inviting lips she had secretly fantasized about on numerous occasions, at his freckled forearms that seemed to have developed sinewy muscle practically overnight—a result of clutching his broomstick and saving Quaffles, undoubtedly—at his shoulders and chest that had broadened notably in the last year alone, a warmth spread through her womb like wildfire, and her body literally bloomed for him, her sex swelling demandingly between her legs.

Oddly, the sensation wasn't completely pleasurable; actually, it rather hurt—and she instinctively knew what she needed to ease the mounting ache.

She just didn't know how to ask for it.

"Ron..."

Chapter 7: Matter of Utmost Importance

Chapter Seven: Matter of Utmost Importance

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This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

oOo

"Ron..."

Her body trembled violently in a concentrated effort not to do something mortifying and with irreversible ramifications—such as rip her clothing off and jump on him—as she gazed up at him, hesitating; she was unsure of what she had even been intending to say, as her rational mind was too busy fighting against the most extraordinarily overpowering instinct—the instinct that screamed at her that she must copulate. Right now. And with Ron.

Hermione flushed at the images in her head: explicit images of Ron on top of her, inside of her, covering her body with his; his sweat-slickened skin sliding against hers as he collided into her again and again; his hands on her body in ways that she had previously been certain would only ever happen in her dreams. Her breathing increased exponentially, hitching dramatically at the vivid, lusty images that assailed her.

The potion! she reminded herself as she averted her eyes from Ron, who had frozen, appearing frightened and uncertain of what to do as Hermione began gasping at the effort to control her own body, her nails scratching at the floor by her thighs.

With a force of sheer will, she recalled the image of Lavender kneeling in front of Ron in that classroom, having clearly just performed fellatio on the boy that Hermione had been secretly in love with for years; the associated surge of disgust and anger that swelled inside her, as he moved to kneel on the floor before her with his arms outstretched as if to lift her, was all she needed to scream, *"Get away from me, Ron!"*

She clamored away from him, scrambling backward as he leaned back on his haunches, now looking scared and shocked, but she couldn't let him touch her again. As it was, Hermione was barely clutching at the tattered edges of her self-control, and if he touched her...she knew that that would be it, and she couldn't allow that: She didn't care that he had all but admitted his feelings for her during their row. It certainly didn't change the fact that he had chosen Lavender Brown; the thought of what they'd done together positively sickened her.

Hermione wasn't weak: Even during an extreme lust-induced state brought on by a mystery potion that was now coursing through her veins, she would obey her brain over her body.

"Get Madam Pomfrey!" she screamed at him. *"Now! GO!"*

Hesitating no longer, Ron leapt to his feet; as he threw one last frightened look at her over his shoulder before bolting from the room and out of sight, Hermione curled herself into a ball on the floor, unable to stifle her moan at the mounting sensation in her womb that had now bloomed well beyond mere desire: Agony had blossomed there, an agony that increased with every second that ticked by in which her physical urges remained unfulfilled.

Hurry, Ron, hurry, she silently prayed, her eyes clenched against the pain, her fist shoved into her mouth in an effort to stifle her moans as surely as she attempted to stifle her urge to mount Ron

and ride him until he spilled his seed into her womb—the only thing, she instinctively knew, that would dull the ever-increasing ache...

But maybe she was wrong; surely the potion had an antidote.

An antidote that didn't involve Ron and his semen, she amended.

oOo

Ron didn't stop running until he reached the hospital wing, the mental image of Hermione's pale face and wild-looking eyes propelling him onward; she'd almost seemed scared of him, the way she'd recoiled from him and screamed at him not to touch her. He had no idea what that bleeding potion was doing to her, but panic had taken root in his mind, rendering all else inconsequential: *Get help, and get it fast.*

As it was nearing curfew, he encountered only a scattered handful of students in the corridors during his sprint through the castle, and no teachers—not even Peeves the poltergeist.

"Help!" he bellowed once he'd finally crashed through the infirmary's closed doors. Luckily, Madam Pomfrey hadn't retired for the evening and was currently examining her one and only patient. Ron dashed up the aisle and skidded to a halt in front of the school's Healer, barely even registering the Slytherin girl on the hospital bed who was eying him curiously.

"Well? What is it, then, Weasley?" Madam Pomfrey prompted a bit impatiently.

"It's Hermione—Hermione Granger," he gasped, his lungs feeling as if they might burst as he placed his hands on his knees, attempting to catch his breath. "There was an accident—Filch's office—she needs help—"

"What sort of accident?" Madam Pomfrey inquired calmly but urgently as she began gathering medical supplies from the nearby hovering tray, shoving them into the pockets of her Healer's apron.

"A potion—don't know exactly—her foot got cut and it got in her bloodstream. She's acting...I don't know...like she's in a lot o'pain or something..." Ron experienced a surge of apprehension and impatience as he shifted his weight from foot to foot, thinking that the longer they wasted with questions, the longer Hermione was in danger.

"Miss Parkinson," Madam Pomfrey said sharply, addressing the student in the nearby bed, "go and fetch Professor Slughorn, and have him meet me in Mr. Filch's office."

"But my toe—"

"Has an ingrown nail and is hardly a life or death situation, silly girl—now do as I say, off with you. After you, Weasley."

Pansy scampered off after gracing Madam Pomfrey with a mutinous glare, but Ron barely registered this: He'd already sprinted from the room and was jogging back to Filch's office.

The trip back through the castle was a nerve-wracking journey indeed, since Ron found himself having to pause multiple times to wait for the older witch to catch up; he had to restrain himself several times from yelling at her to get a move on already, so that by the time they finally made it to Filch's office, his nerves were frayed and singed raw.

Hermione was much the same as she'd been when he'd left her, only she was now curled into a ball, trembling violently on the floor. As the Healer rushed into the room and knelt by the girl, her

wand waving over Hermione while she muttered incantations under her breath, Hermione's eyes suddenly snapped open, locking on Ron as if sensing him there: "Get him outta here," she moaned as she rolled away from him, her arms clutching her stomach as if in severe pain. *"Please."*

Ron stared at her, feeling stung despite the fact that she clearly wasn't in her right mind: What the hell was she thinking, that he'd actually hurt her? All he wanted was to help.

"Mr. Weasley," Madam Pomfrey said calmly but sternly, lowering her wand. "Thank you for your assistance, but you must leave—now."

"What's wrong with her?" he demanded stubbornly. "You know, don't you?"

"Your concern is noted and appreciated, but I must insist that you go to your dormitory—*straight away*, Weasley, no dawdling."

As Hermione continued to moan and tremble in a ball on the floor, Ron backed out of the room, nearly colliding with Professor Slughorn, who was wheezing and gasping for breath, clutching his large, round belly with both arms. "Wallenby," the Potions teacher greeted him distractedly before disappearing inside the caretaker's office and shutting the door behind him.

Ron stared at the closed door for several long moments, feeling stunned and confused by everything that had transpired before he finally turned around and made his way slowly back to Gryffindor Tower. During the journey back to the common room, his mind whirled as he fretted over what that potion had been, whether Pomfrey and Slughorn would be able to set Hermione right, and why she had acted so afraid of him.

He hesitated when he reached the Fat Lady, not feeling up to dealing with Lavender and knowing that she'd most likely waited up for him, and she certainly wasn't one to disappoint: "Won-Won, you're early!" she trilled happily, hopping up from where she'd been whispering with Parvati, their heads tucked together.

Bloody hell. "Sorry, Lav, a bit tired," he said lamely, suddenly too exhausted to feel guilty about the disappointed way in which her face fell as he moved around her and made his way up to his dorm. He half expected her to follow him, to demand that he talk to her, but to his shattering relief she did no such thing.

When he entered the dormitory, it was to find Harry lying in bed with the Marauder's Map open on his chest, the Prince's book at his elbow; Ron could hear the shower going in the loo and assumed it was Neville, since he'd noticed Dean and Seamus down in the common room.

"What's the matter?" Harry said, sitting up in bed at once at Ron's appearance and shutting the map. "Mischief managed," he added, tapping it once with his wand.

"It's 'Ermione," Ron replied miserably, flopping down on his bed in a daze, facing his best mate.

"You were with—? What about her? What happened?"

"We had detention together, so we were rowing—no surprise there—and she stepped on a potion bottle, and the glass cut her foot through her shoe, and...and the potion got in her blood..."

"Potion? What potion?" Harry was already standing and in the process of pulling on a jumper over his t-shirt.

"Dunno. It was in a storage room of Filch's that we were meant to be cleaning. Hermione was trying t'figure out what it was before we started rowing."

"Well, let's get to the hospital, then," Harry said immediately as he began searching under his bed for his trainers.

Ron shook his head slowly: "Madam Pomfrey ordered me back here. She wouldn't tell me what was wrong with 'er, Harry, but she knew—I could tell. You didn't see Hermione; she was acting...I dunno...scared of me or something. I don't think they'll let us anywhere near her."

Harry stared at Ron, processing everything that his best friend was telling him as he slowly sank back down on his bed. "All right, then, first thing in the morning, we'll check on her. Even if they won't let us see her, surely they'll be able to tell us something by then."

Ron nodded in agreement, unable to get the image of Hermione trembling on the floor and curled into a ball out of his head.

"How—how bad was she, Ron?"

Again, he shook his head: "Not sure. She was bloody acting like she was in a lot o'pain, though." He paused before asking, "They'll be able to put 'er right, won't they? Surely there's an antidote?"

"If they don't have one here at Hogwarts, surely there'll be at St. Mungo's," Harry said reasonably, but instead of feeling comforted by those words, Ron felt sickened by the idea of Hermione being carted off to St. Mungo's for who-knows-how-long; he couldn't help but think of Katie Bell, who hadn't yet returned from the Wizarding hospital after her encounter with that cursed necklace back in October.

At that thought, he felt chilled by the idea that maybe...

No. No, it was a fluke, that was all. Katie had been Imperius'ed to carry that necklace into the castle, hadn't she, when the thing with Hermione had just been an accident; that potion could've come from anywhere. There's no bleeding way the two incidents could possibly be related.

Even still, he kept his mouth shut about it, dreading that Harry might somehow find a way to link Hermione's accident to Draco Malfoy.

Before they could discuss Hermione any further, at any rate, Neville came out of the loo, and Ron used the distraction to shift fully onto his bed and pull the curtains shut around himself, never mind that he was still fully clothed and wide awake. He lay in bed for what felt like hours, thinking about Hermione, replaying her accident again and again, his mind swimming with snippets from their argument:

"Besides, I wanted it to be *you*... Ron, *you* thought he'd put the liquid luck in there as well, so how could you fault *me* for thinking the same thing as you? ...instead of asking for clarification, your solution was to start snogging the first girl who offered herself to you on a silver platter...We only kissed a few times—it was hardly a 'serious relationship,' and the whole time I secretly wished it was—"

Ron rolled onto his side restlessly, pulling his knees into himself as her words tumbled through his head over and over again. His stomach churned with guilt and regret, never mind that his getting together with Lavender had less to do with Hermione dating Krum and more to do with his own stupid self-esteem issues. (He saw that now.) He'd honestly managed to convince himself at the time that Hermione didn't feel that way about him (with good reason, since she hadn't exactly made herself clear)—and then there was Lavender, who'd made herself *very* clear, offering herself to him on "a silver platter," as Hermione had put it, and making him feel like he was the fucking King of the Wizarding World or something.

Somehow, though, that didn't make him feel any better about carrying on with Lavender while knowing how he felt about Hermione, and figuring out how Hermione felt about him—and knowing that he was hurting both girls for no good reason other than the fact that he was too much of a bloody tit to tell Lavender he wanted to end it.

And about the whole Krum thing: If Ron was being honest with himself, he'd admit that it hadn't been any of his damned business, had it? He'd been a jealous fourteen-year-old kid at the time. Why should Hermione have told him about her "relationship" with Krum when Ron hadn't even shown her any interest until after the bloody fact?

Bloody fucking hell. He'd stupidly made a mess of things, hadn't he, and now there was this accident, which probably wouldn't even have happened to begin with if they hadn't been bloody arguing. If Ron had just kept his big mouth shut they might've finished what they were supposed to be doing and gotten back to their dorms. They probably wouldn't've finally put their feelings out there on the table like that—Ron could hardly believe that they'd practically admitted their feelings for each other, even if they'd been yelling—but at least Hermione would be safe.

Similar thoughts continued to tumble through his mind in an unrelenting rush, but he must have dozed off at some point, because the next thing he knew, he was being shaken awake.

As he jerked to with a start, shaking off disturbed dreams of not being able to get to Hermione, Ron was surprised by the sight of Professor McGonagall hovering over him in her dressing gown, looking much the way she had that night at the start of term—only instead of looking livid, there was definite worry etched on her lined face.

"Wazzit?" he asked groggily, sitting up in bed and automatically performing a quick physical inventory to check that he wasn't sporting morning wood: For fuck's sake, the last thing he needed was to "salute" bloody McGonagall, of all people.

"Weasley, I'm terribly sorry to disturb you at this hour," his Head of House whispered urgently as he rubbed his bleary eyes, "but I am afraid it cannot wait until morning. You must come with me—right away."

"What's going on?" he asked, suddenly wide awake as his thoughts flashed automatically to Hermione. Glancing about, he noted by the moonlight that Harry, Neville, Dean, and Seamus were all still sound asleep.

"It's Miss Granger: She requires your assistance, and I fear it is a matter of utmost importance. We must proceed with due haste."

Chapter 8: Love, Hate, Lust

Chapter Eight: Love, Hate, Lust

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This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

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"It's Miss Granger: She requires your assistance, and I fear it is a matter of utmost importance. We must proceed with due haste. Your parents have already arrived and have been informed of the situation, of course, since you are, strictly speaking, underage for another four days; they're awaiting us in my office."

"Situation?" Ron repeated, his mind whirring with fear over what could possibly be going on with Hermione. "My parents are here?" What the bloody hell did they have to do with anything? And what did *he* have to do with anything, for that matter? "What—what's the situation?"

"Everything will be explained to you shortly, Weasley; I'll leave you to get dressed now, but I implore you to get to my office as quickly as you can." McGonagall then turned on her heel and strode toward the door without another word, leaving him alone with the loud snores of his dorm mates and to fret over what was wrong with Hermione. How the hell could Ron possibly help when she clearly hadn't wanted him anywhere near her before? And why had McGonagall sent for his parents? If it was something serious, shouldn't *Hermione's* parents be informed?

As he performed a quick Breath-Freshening Charm on himself before stowing his wand in his jeans—thankfully, he was still fully dressed from the evening before—he remembered that Hermione was already seventeen, wasn't she? Maybe they didn't want the Muggles to know any more than they had to about their world? But if it was serious, though, then surely they'd have to be told that their only daughter had been harmed, seventeen or not? Unless Hermione had asked them not to tell her parents? As that thought flitted through his mind, he halfheartedly attempted to flatten his hair before slipping out of his dorm and jogging down the stairs after McGonagall.

Ron's pulse raced with combined nervousness and curiosity as he knocked on his Head of House's door, his imagination running rampant with all sorts of mental scenarios and what they thought Ron could do to help. Before he could come up with any ideas that vaguely made any sort of sense, though, the door was flung open, and he found himself engulfed by a very familiar set of warm arms as he glimpsed a flash of hair just as brightly red as his own.

Guess Mum's forgiven me for "whipping out my wand," he thought wildly, remembering the particularly unpleasant/humiliating Howler his mother had sent him at the start of term as she squeezed him and planted sloppy kisses to his cheeks.

"What's going on?" he asked as his mother reluctantly released him, feeling slightly dazed; his father smiled at him grimly in greeting and slipped one arm around his shoulders, ushering him toward a chair in front of McGonagall's desk.

"Have a seat, son," his dad said, and Ron hesitantly sank into the proffered chair, taking in his surroundings as he did so and noting that McGonagall and his parents weren't the only occupants of the spacious office: A forty-ish witch with short blonde hair and wearing green Healer's robes was standing just to the right of McGonagall's desk, sharing the same somber expression as everyone else.

"Look, if someone doesn't tell me what's going on with Hermione right effing now, I'm gonna go bloody mental."

"Mr. Weasley, I'm Athena Thorson, Healer-in-Charge of St. Mungo's Third Floor, Potions and Plant Poisoning," began the Healer before his mother could admonish him for his foul language and as McGonagall slipped quietly from the room; Ron's heart sank at the confirmation that Hermione had indeed been moved to Britain's only Wizarding hospital. "Since time is of the essence, I'm going to try to explain this as briefly as possible: Your friend, Hermione Granger, was exposed to a potion known as *Servus Sponsae*."

She paused momentarily, as if trying to figure out the best way to word what she had to say, and Ron took the opportunity to glance at his parents: It seemed as if they'd heard the spiel already, because although their expressions remained grim, they didn't exactly act surprised by what Healer Thorson was telling him.

"To give you a brief history lesson so you'll understand what we're dealing with," the Healer continued, "in the Middle Ages it was common practice for 'esteemed' Pureblood males of Wizarding society to capture and enslave young Muggle-born witches; it was considered a sport of sorts, and these women were more often than not brutalized and murdered, but the nastiest of men kept them as slaves, either for sexual purposes or otherwise, and many of these witches were also bred for the purpose of creating more slaves. *Servus Sponsae* was first brewed to guarantee their complete and utter compliance."

"What are you saying?" Ron asked, feeling ill by her words, though he had a hunch about what she was getting at.

Impossibly, her slightly lined face became even more serious as she crossed her arms over her chest and looked him straight in the eye: "What I'm saying, Mr. Weasley, is that Hermione will die if she doesn't have sexual intercourse, and her condition is worsening by the minute. She's been administered potions to dull the pain, of course, but I'm afraid she's still in agony—and you're the prime candidate to help her, since you're the one who triggered the potion immediately after her accident when you touched her."

"There's nothing else that can be done?" his mother interjected loudly, apparently unable to retain her silence any longer. "He's only *sixteen*, he's just a boy—"

"I'll be seventeen in four days," Ron protested, making no attempt to rein in his annoyance. "Will a few days really make that much of a bloody difference?"

"There is an antidote," Healer Thorson answered Molly, ignoring Ron's outburst, "but since there hasn't been a known case of exposure to *Servus Sponsae* in over a century, as it's illegal to brew, buy, or sell, the hospital unfortunately doesn't stock the antidote, and it would take three months to brew; Miss Granger doesn't have that long: I'm estimating that she has a good twelve hours before her body goes into shock and her vital organs begin to shut down if she isn't...relieved before then."

"I'll do it," Ron stated unthinkingly.

"Ronnie, think about what you're—"

"Mum, this is *Hermione*," he cut in angrily. "What d'you suggest, we bloody sit around and wait for her t'*die*? If I can save 'er, I'm—I'm gonna do it."

"Ron, of course that's not what your mother was suggesting," his father said reasonably. "You know we love Hermione like a daughter, but if there's any other way—"

"We're wasting time!" Ron protested as he jumped to his feet, beyond anxious to help Hermione and enraged that his parents wanted to debate the issue. "We don't have time t'sit around and bloody discuss it like we're arguing over *dinner plans* or some shit—she's in bloody *pain*, Dad, and it'll only get worse!"

"There's another option," Healer Thorson said quietly, addressing his parents. "From what we understand, it doesn't necessarily have to be Ron—simply a virile Pureblood male with a similar genetic structure as the one who triggered the potion. If he has an older brother, perhaps—"

"NO!" Ron shouted, sickened by the thought of Fred or George—or even Percy, Charlie, or Bill—touching Hermione...like that. "No, it's gotta be me; Mum, Dad, I'm doing this with or without your permission, and I don't bloody care if I don't turn seventeen for another week; I'm a man, and I'm doing this."

"Just one moment," Arthur said, looking pointedly at the Healer. "Your use of the word 'virile—'"

"Yes, the fact that your son triggered the potion after Hermione was exposed to it suggests that he's more than capable of...impregnating her; that's the purpose of the potion, after all: It induces hyper-ovulation and renders all forms of birth control ineffective. In addition, he must..." For the first time, Healer Thorson's professional persona slipped somewhat, her cheeks reddening before she continued:

"He must finish inside her, that's essential, and it will take more than once. The last case—dating 1894—took twenty-four hours before the potion was neutralized completely. The chances of a pregnancy resulting are...quite probable; that's one of the main reasons why I suggested that an older brother perform the task in his stead. Of course, at the risk of being insensitive, there's always the possibility of the fetus being aborted at a later time if the parents are unable or unwilling to care for it, but adoption would be the most viable option to consider, assuming a pregnancy does occur—but for the time being, we must concentrate on doing everything we can to save Hermione's life."

The three Weasleys gaped at her with identical expressions of astonishment and understanding; Arthur was the first to break the prolonged silence: "Yes...well, that's...perhaps Fred or George would be willing—"

"NO!" Ron roared for a second time, demanding the attention of everyone present. "Like hell they're touching her. Dad, you don't know what they can be like with girls; they'd—they'd enjoy it a bit too bloody much," he added, his ears heating up considerably as he thought guiltily to himself, *Like you wouldn't?*

"Son, I know you care about Hermione, but think about this: There's a very real possibility that you could become a *father*, and you're not ready for that sort of responsibility—"

"What, and you think 'Ermione's ready to be a mother? But *she* doesn't have a bleedin' choice, does she?—and I reckon I know her, and she's not gonna bloody consider an *abortion*"—he literally spat the word—"to be an option, and I'll be damned if I stand aside and let her have Fred or George's kid when they don't care about her like I do, so—so I'll step up and do what I've gotta do; I'd even marry 'er if she didn't bloody hate my guts." Ron didn't even pause to consider his words too carefully, because he was truly speaking from his heart for the first time. "And anyway, the longer we bloody sit around talking about it..." His voice trailed off as something crucial suddenly occurred to him, and he felt like an insensitive tit for not thinking of it sooner: "Wait up, has anyone even bothered asking her what the effing Merlin *she* wants?" he asked, rounding on Healer Thorson.

"Hermione has been given all of the information pertaining to her condition and required

treatment, and she gave us permission to do what's necessary to save her life."

"So she's...she's expecting me," Ron said slowly, his face warming impossibly as he felt his parents' eyes on him.

"Yes, Mr. Weasley, she's expecting you."

"Brilliant. Let's do it, then." His words held a confidence that he didn't quite feel, but he knew what he had to do. For Hermione.

oOo

Agony.

There was no other word to describe what she was experiencing as the rolling waves of pain squeezed her womb unrelentingly and washed through her every limb, her every nerve ending. A sob escaped her lips as she lay curled on her side in the hospital bed of the private room they'd given her, a pillow clenched between her knees and thick, wet tears sliding down her face; between her legs, she could feel how ridiculously swollen the flesh there was, her own resultant fluids wetting her inner thighs and the pillow pressed there; her breasts were hard and aching, and she could see down the gap in the simple robe they'd dressed her in that her nipples were tight little nubs, and they were ridiculously sensitive—the feel of the cotton rubbing against them was nearly unbearable.

After she had first been brought to St. Mungo's and finally left alone, Hermione had made the mistake of taking advantage of her newfound privacy to masturbate in an attempt to ease the ache in her body, but the quick orgasm elicited by her own touch had merely resulted in the pain in her womb increasing to torturous, agonizing proportions.

Torture.

It was torture to think of Ron and how badly she needed him, especially while knowing that there was a large part of her that still resented everything he'd put her through in the last months—whether that resentment was justified or not, and whether Hermione was partially to blame or not—and now she felt doubly resentful that he was the only person who could "cure" her, apart from, perhaps, one of his brothers—and that simply wasn't happening.

Concurrently, there was another, undeniable part of her that was glad that it was him that had to be the one and wouldn't have it any other way. When Healer Thorson had first explained to her exactly what her condition was and what necessary actions must be taken not only ease her suffering but to actually *save her life*, Hermione was ashamed to admit to herself that while she'd been partly terrified of the outcome—terrified of the necessary act in question and even more terrified still of the possibility of conceiving a child—she had also been relieved that the solution could be so simple: Her pride wouldn't allow her to ask for him, but she had never wanted anything with such a feral intensity in all of her seventeen years.

Ron would be here soon, and then he would take away her pain.

Oh, God, he would...he would fuck her, an idea that simultaneously thrilled her and horrified her and caused her to moan in unbearable longing, her hips gyrating against the pillow tucked between her knees of their own accord.

The rational portion of her brain was aware that she was behaving like a bitch in heat at the idea of sex with Ron, but there didn't seem to be much she could do about it, a thought that had her bursting into uncontrollable, hysterical giggles; she rolled onto her other side, feeling quite mad in

her yearning that he gone far beyond mere desire.

She loved him. She hated him. She lusted him.

It was all quite amusing when she considered the conundrum.

Or at least it would be if she didn't feel like she was quite literally going out of her mind—which she was, actually; Healer Thorson had explained that if she wasn't "cured" in a certain timeframe, her mind would go first: She would literally go mad from unfulfilled longing, and then her body would go into shock and her vital organs would eventually shut down.

At that thought, she began to experience a genuine sense of panic as she wondered what could possibly be taking so long: What if he said no? It was a humiliating idea, to think that he'd rather not touch her in that way, and as the pain continued to contract her uterus in an ironclad grip, Hermione began to reluctantly reconsider the possibility of Fred or George or Charlie—surely not Bill, since he was engaged, or Percy, since he wasn't speaking to the family—taking Ron's place if he refused.

At the thought of Ron's brothers, she was reminded of the fact that his parents had been contacted and told about her condition; how utterly mortifying to know that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley knew what was happening to her, and to know that they knew that it had to be one of their sons to help her.

At least, she consoled herself, her own parents hadn't been informed; she had refused this, and since she was a woman in the Wizarding world, that refusal was her right. Of course, if a pregnancy resulted from this, then she would have no choice but to eventually explain what had happened, but if it didn't then Hermione had no intentions of ever letting them find out.

"Hermione? How are you feeling?"

Her head jerked up, and she was slightly surprised to see the young medi-witch hovering over her, who then pressed a damp cloth to Hermione's sweaty brow while simultaneously waving her wand over her patient, and Hermione knew she was checking her vital signs.

"Worse," she replied to the question, jerking away from the young woman's touch and surprised by the scratchy sound of her own voice; her body was so sensitized that being touched was unbearable, unless it was by Ron, the person her body intuitively needed. "It's getting worse."

"Well, I've got good news for you, then: He's here, waiting just outside. I asked him to give us a moment, because it's important that you hydrate first." At that, she pressed a glass of water to Hermione's lips, which she drank gratefully; she hadn't been aware of how parched she'd been, and the cool liquid tasted good. "Should you need anything at any time during the course of your...treatment," the medi-witch added as she took the now empty glass from Hermione and sat it on the nearby table, "all you have to do is say my name, and I'll hear you. Also, we'll be checking on you every hour or so—you'll have warning before we enter, of course—just to ensure your safety and that everything is going...accordingly."

"He wouldn't hurt me," Hermione said automatically, which earned a soft smile from the young medi-witch, whose nametag read "Miranda."

"In that case, if you're ready, I'll just go and get him. I wish you the best of luck, Hermione."

Hermione nodded her thanks while her body positively screamed with longing at the promise of fulfillment, and her mind thought, *Oh, God, this is it. This is really happening.*

Miranda disappeared through the door, and, scarcely a minute later, Ron's familiar tall, ginger-

haired form slipped into the room, his hands shoved into his pockets as the door was closed behind him: As their eyes met across the room, she registered a strange combination of fear, hesitation, uncertainty, and determination in his blue eyes.

Before she could process anything further, however, rational thought abandoned her, and her instincts finally overrode her brain as her body roared to life.

Chapter 9: Silk and Cream

The Waiting Place

Chapter Nine: Silk and Cream

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

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Arthur Weasley observed his youngest son out of the corner of his eye as they walked quietly together down the harshly lit corridor of St. Mungo's Third Floor, having just Floo'ed directly to Healer Thorson's office from Minerva's; despite the boy's insistence that he be the one to "cure" Hermione, Arthur knew his son well enough to know that he was terrified: Ron's hands were shoved deeply into the pockets of his trousers, his eyes were darting about nervously, and his throat was working as if he was repeatedly swallowing hard lumps. In fact, he looked much the same as he had as a small child, when Arthur had taken him for an outing in Muggle London at Christmastime to see the Muggle Christmas lights displays, just the two of them. (Of course, that fear in his eyes had eventually given way to wonderment, just as his current apprehension most likely would.)

After the letter that Arthur and Molly had received at the start of term concerning his son's infraction and subsequent punishment—which hadn't actually described his "extracurricular activities" in specific detail—Arthur had wondered whether Ron was actually having sex, and he could only hope that his son was using the incantation if that was indeed the case, just as he and Molly had instructed all of their children. After all, they knew better than anyone the hardships brought on by the demands of young parenthood, as they hadn't been much older than Ron when Molly had become pregnant with Bill.

Studying his youngest son now, however, while it was difficult to ascertain for sure, he suspected that Ron was still a virgin; naturally, though, the anxiety that he exuded could stem from the fact that it was a life-or-death situation and the fact that it was *Hermione* whose life was on the line, the girl for whom he had clearly harbored feelings from a young age. Even if Ron himself hadn't previously recognized those feelings or acted on them, he'd all but admitted to being in love with Hermione back there in Minerva's office: He had unthinkingly declared his desire to marry Hermione, but even if he hadn't, the expression on his face when Healer Thorson had suggested that a brother act in his stead had been most revealing indeed.

Coming from any other young man, Ron's territoriality and persistence might have been viewed as the actions of a randy teen who saw an opportunity, to be quite blunt, to shag the girl he fancied, but there seemed to be a maturity about his youngest son that hadn't been there just a couple of months before when he'd come home for the Christmas holidays. Of course, dire situations had the tendency to make people grow up fast; Arthur knew from first-hand experience that they made men out of boys.

Once Healer Thorson, who'd been leading the way, stopped outside a closed door with a simple number and a sign that read, "Do not disturb; see the medi-witch on duty," she nodded at Ron and said, "This is it. I'm not sure what you're expecting, Mr. Weasley, but I should warn you that this isn't going to be...entirely enjoyable, for either of you. As I explained before, she's in quite a bit of pain, and you're both going to be exhausted and sore before it's through. We will, of course, be sending someone in to check on you hourly, and if you need refreshment—and you will—you

need only say the medi-witch's name: Miranda is on duty for the remainder of the night, and she can order you food from the cafeteria."

She then glanced at Arthur, who was trying his best to appear interested in a colorful mural on the opposite wall and attempting valiantly not to eavesdrop, before turning back to Ron: "I'm going to be quite frank with you now, Mr. Weasley: The less...foreplay, the better; her body is already in a hyper-sensitized state, and only when your semen reaches her womb will she experience any relief, so don't attempt to hold back your orgasm to prolong your own pleasure or hers, do you understand? You're not here for her pleasure or your own—you're here to perform a job, and that job is to save her life, *do you understand?*"

"Y—yeah," Ron stammered, and when Arthur glanced in his direction, he saw his son swallowing hard, his ears as brightly red as his hair as he avoided looking directly at Healer Thorson, instead focusing on the door over her shoulder, that terrified expression firmly in place.

"Excellent. Miranda is in with Hermione at the moment but will be coming to fetch you soon. Good luck, Mr. Weasley. Despite any outward appearances to the contrary, this is a selfless thing you're doing, since I can't imagine that it's your desire to become a parent at your age. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other patients to check in on." She then smiled grimly at Ron before turning and striding away.

As Ron stared after her, his face had drained of all color.

"Ron," Arthur said at the same moment that Ron said, "Dad..."

"It'll be fine," Arthur said reassuringly, patting his son on the back. "No matter what happens, we'll get through this."

Ron was silent for a moment before quietly confessing, his ears once more a shocking shade of scarlet as he stared at his trainers, "I've never...y'know...done this."

"Oh? I wasn't certain."

"Yeah, that thing with Lavender," he continued, one hand coming up to awkwardly rub the back of his neck as he continued to avoid his father's gaze, "it was stupid and...and I don't even really care about her, which I'm not proud of, but she made me feel...I don't know...like..."

"Like you're special?"

"Well, yeah," Ron replied with a sheepish grin. "I mean...well, I was confused about how Hermione felt; I'd get, y'know, mixed signals or whatever, and I know it's not an excuse about how I've been carrying on with Lav when I don't care about 'er, but I was jealous 'cause I found out 'Ermine'd snogged Viktor Krum and a bit hacked 'cause I thought she thought I was rubbish at everything, and then there was Lavender...and she was pretty bloody blatant and acted like she thought I was *brilliant* at everything..." He shook his head, his eyes squeezing closed briefly, before continuing: "And I carried on with her 'cause I was too much of a bleedin' tit to end it, but I didn't...y'know...*sleep* with her, Dad. I just...want you to know. I did other stuff, stuff I'm not proud of, but not *that*."

"Son, I understand."

For the first time, he met his father's eyes: "You do?"

"Believe it or not, but when I was in school I wasn't exactly the same confident man you see before you now," Arthur said with a grin. "I wasn't the most athletic, I didn't have the best grades, and I certainly wasn't the most handsome—although, clearly I grew into my looks," he added,

unable to help himself, pushing his horn-rimmed glasses up on his nose, and watched on in satisfaction as his son broke into a low chuckle. "At any rate, then there was your mother, who I just considered to be completely out of my league: She was smart, vivacious, and the prettiest thing I'd ever seen—still is, as a matter o'fact—and, like you, I didn't think she could possibly be interested in the likes of *me*."

He frowned then, remembering Molly's small but impressive gaggle of suitors, but then he smiled in the next moment: "Sometimes I still can't believe she chose me, when ol' Slughorn didn't think me worth noticing. But I reckon he was wrong, wasn't he?" he added with another smile. "Ron, you're special; since you were a small boy, you've always had this...*heart* about you, and Hermione sees that, I know it for a fact. She doesn't expect you to be perfect; she expects you to be *you*—only...slightly more matured."

Ron was smiling openly now, and Arthur took that moment to tack on: "I'm proud of you, son. It's a grave responsibility you've agreed to take on, and I've no doubt in my mind that if, by chance, Hermione *does* become pregnant as a result of this, that you'll step up and do the right thing by her: *That's* what makes you a man—not the date on the calendar. One more thing: Even though your mother and I haven't had an opportunity to discuss it, I'm sure she'll agree with me when I say that we will do everything we can to help you out, since neither you nor Hermione really have a choice in this matter."

"Dad, I...I haven't even broken up with Lavender properly," Ron admitted guiltily after a moment. "Actually, I haven't broken up with her *at all*."

"Ooh boy," Arthur replied with a sympathetic chuckle. "Well, I won't lie to you and say that the young lady will understand when you explain all o'this to her, but, given the choice between appeasing your girlfriend and saving the life of the girl you love, I think you're making the right decision." He watched as his son blushed at the term "girl you love," but the boy—er, man, he corrected himself—didn't deny it. "Tell me something, do you intend to end it with Lavender after tonight?"

Arthur experienced a sting of pride when Ron didn't hesitate to nod, despite the look of dread in his eyes: "Well, yeah...I mean, if Hermione'll have me, I mean, other than, y'know, like *that*, then yeah, I couldn't keep on with Lavender," he sputtered as he continued to blush, looking very much like the little boy he'd once been, which had Arthur chortling as he clapped his son's back affectionately.

"Atta boy, Ron."

"Dad? What if Hermione hates me for this?" he asked, voicing what was clearly a real fear he was harboring. "I mean, she's already in a right state over my getting with Lavender, and we were rowing right before her accident, so what if she resents that it's...me?" He hesitated, his expression dark as he forced out the next words: "What if she'd actually prefer that it be Fred or George?"

Before he could do more than open his mouth to respond, the door to Hermione's room opened, and the young medi-witch slipped into the hallway. "She's ready," she said, looking directly at Ron.

When Ron looked at Arthur, that scared expression slipped back onto his son's features, and so he nodded encouragingly: "It'll be fine. Remember, this is necessary to save her life, and she'll ultimately be grateful for that."

oOo

"Well, he's in with her," Arthur announced the moment he'd stepped out of Minerva's hearth,

using his wand to clean the ash from his robes and the floor of the Head of Gryffindor House's office.

Molly, who'd been speaking with Minerva across her desk, rose at her husband's appearance, her hands coming up to her mouth anxiously as she turned to face him: "How did he seem? Oh, Arthur, I'm still not sure this is a good idea—he's just a baby—surely Charlie would...?"

"He's fine, considering," he responded as he strode across the room and placed his hands reassuringly on his wife's shoulders. "And it had to be Ron—and he's hardly a baby, Molly—of that I'm now certain: He's in love with her, that much is obvious, and it would devastate him to see her with one of his brothers. Besides, I'm more than positive that she's in love with him as well."

"She is," Minerva said quietly from her place behind her desk. "She confided in me at the start of term, the poor girl—she was quite distraught over his...romantic liaisons with Miss Brown."

"They're both so young," Molly said weakly after a moment.

"So were we, love," Arthur pointed out, giving her a loving squeeze around her shoulders as he kissed her temple, "but we turned out more than fine, did we not?"

She smiled at him grudgingly: "Of course, darling, even still, the possibility of a baby right now, what with You-Know-Who's return..." She visibly shuddered, unwilling to voice the worst of her fears as she turned back to Minerva: "Have her parents been told about the situation?"

"She elected not to inform them, and as she's seventeen, that's her right. Of course, if a pregnancy does indeed result..." Minerva sighed heavily, rubbing her temples as if attempting to stifle a headache. "Molly, Arthur, I would like to take this opportunity to extend my sincerest apologies on the behalf of Hogwarts School for this most unfortunate happenstance, of which we take full responsibility. If Albus was here, I am more than certain that he would concur when I say that special arrangements will be made to ensure that both Ron and Hermione can continue their education uninterrupted in the event of a pregnancy, the details of which can be decided upon at a later date. In addition, we will be conducting a thorough investigation into how that potion ended up on school grounds, starting with Mr. Filch, who will be questioned first thing in the morning. In the meantime, if there's anything that you require, anything at all..."

"I think," Arthur said slowly, "that what's required of everyone is a few hours of rest, as we're not helping the kids by sitting around and fretting."

"Speak for yourself, Arthur," his wife responded glumly. "I don't think I'll rest until this is over. Poor, dear Hermione... She's such a lovely, considerate girl, she doesn't deserve this...and my poor boy..."

oOo

Ron's heart felt like it was about to beat itself right out of his ribcage as he slipped quietly into the semi-darkened hospital room, startling slightly at the sound of the door shutting itself behind him; immediately, his eyes sought and found the unmistakable girl writhing on the single hospital bed.

Hermione's hair was somehow even wilder and bushier than usual, sweat darkening her hairline, and her cheeks were flushed as she panted, her fists gripping the sheets beneath her body and her hips moving in little thrusting movements against the pillow between her legs as she twisted on the mattress, her wild eyes finally meeting his.

Blimey, she's fucking beautiful, he couldn't help but think, the lower portion of his anatomy responding automatically to the erotic sight even as he was seized by a sudden onslaught of panic:

What the bloody hell was he supposed to do now? Should he say something? Just approach her and...do what? Pull her legs apart and...? Bloody fucking Merlin, what had he gotten himself into? Unable to help himself, he wondered madly what her reaction would be if he said, "Hi, I'm here to shag you?" and consequently had to force himself not to burst into hysterical laughter at that highly inappropriate thought. "Hey, Hermione," he said instead, feeling like a tit at the high-pitched sound of his voice: Not exactly very manly, was it?

Bloody fucking cheese on a mother-loving biscuit, he thought when she did nothing more than whimper and avert her eyes from him, burrowing her face into her pillow. What the fuck was he supposed to do now? Could things be any more bleedin' awkward?

Feeling like he might keel over any moment from sheer embarrassment, his ears burning hotly, Ron forced his wobbly legs to carry him across the room, stopping only when he reached her bedside; he hesitated, unsure if it would freak her out or come off as presumptuous if he sat on the bed, so he settled in the chair next to her instead, his pulse racing wildly as he wondered what he should do next.

Up close, he could see that she was wearing a loose robe that gaped considerably over her heaving chest, and her left breast was clearly visible through the gap: At the sight of her creamy-looking skin, her round, swollen tit, and small, pink nipple as hard as a pebble, Ron's cock gave a reactive jolt, and he reached down unthinkingly to adjust himself in his jeans. His eyes drifted lower: She was on top of the covers, and since the robe was quite short, he was afforded with a lovely view of a whole lotta leg and the bottom curve of her smooth-looking bum, and the way she straddled that pillow like her life depended on it...

Ron gulped, unsure if he should touch her, say something else, or wait for her to say something, as her silence wasn't exactly making this easy for him.

As his eyes drifted back up her body, he saw that Hermione was watching him watching her, peering up at him from beneath her arm, while her chest continued to heave, in a manner that could only be described as...possessive, animalistic...like she was bloody gagging for him. "Ron..." she finally whispered in a heaving pant, shifting toward him on the bed and causing the pillow to dislodge from the cradle of her knees. "I—I can't stand it...please..."

He swallowed hard once more as his eyes were drawn to her slightly parted thighs: Her...her bits were barely concealed by the hem of her robe, and all Ron would have to do was reach over and...

Oh, fuck, he wanted this, he knew guiltily, and more than just to save her life, but because he was horny as all hell for her. *Oh, bloody fucking hell. Quit bloody thinking it to death and just do it already...*

He stood up then, his entire body trembling with nerves as he wavered, uncertain if he should remove his shirt or not, then thought, *Fuck it*, before pulling it over his head before he could over-think it. Once he'd tossed it aside, he saw that Hermione was watching him intensely, now almost hyperventilating as she bit her lower lip in...anticipation?

He hesitated once more as he reached for the button of his trousers, needing to know something first, feeling like it would be...*wrong*, somehow, to just...well, to just dive in. "Hermione? I—I've gotta know if it's really me you want..." Swallowing his pride, he forced out, "I mean, if not, I can get Gred or Forge—I mean, Fred or George—or whoever, just say the word..." *Please don't say the word, please don't say the word...*

"Please, Ron," she moaned in a desperation that he'd never expected as she pulled herself to a shaky sitting position against the headboard, and then she did something that he *really* hadn't

expected: Without quite meeting his eye, she brought up two unsteady hands and parted her robe, baring herself to him, and Ron was left breathless, dumbfounded at the sight of her small but high, full tits, her flat, soft-looking belly, the gentle swell of her hips, and the dark curls at the apex of her slender thighs. "I—I want it to be you. It—it has to be you," she whispered breathily, reaching out her arms for him, even as she avoided looking him directly in the eye.

Without allowing himself to think about what he was doing, Ron kicked off his shoes and socks before hastily shoving his pants and trousers down his legs and kicking them aside, aware that Hermione's eyes were now locked on his dick, wide in her pretty face, as she stared at him in an odd combination of shock, lust, fear, and possession.

Ignoring his ridiculously hot ears, Ron climbed on the mattress, and her thighs parted almost instinctively to admit him. Glancing down as he settled between her legs, he experienced a jolt of pure, feral lust at the sight of her swollen flesh and soaking-wet slit. *Fucking hell*. Other than in magazines, he'd never seen a girl's bits before; even what he'd done with Lavender had been nothing more than blind groping in the dark.

Hermione's bits. Fucking fuck on a fiddlestick.

Unable to help himself, having completely forgotten about what Healer Thorson had said about no foreplay, Ron reached down on impulse, swiping her pink, swollen clit experimentally as his palm settled on her juicy opening. "Oh—OH—*RON!*" she gasped immediately in response to his touch, and he felt her wet flesh contracting rhythmically as she bucked against his hand.

It took him an astonished moment to realize that he'd made her come with that simple touch, and his gaze flashed to her face in time to see that her eyes had rolled back in her head, her chest was heaving, and her round tits and tight nipples were straining for the sky. Lost in the moment, overcome by acute yearning at the idea that he'd actually made Hermione *fucking come*, he swooped down, drawing one irresistible, taut peak between his lips and tonguing her pebbled nipple, and then alternating, sucking on the other one while his hand came up to squeeze her tit that his mouth just abandoned, his thumb circling her nipple before pressing into it...

Hermione cried out sharply, her hands suddenly threading roughly in his hair as she arched against him. At first he thought she was encouraging him, but then he realized in the next instant that she was actually attempting to tug him off of her tits. "Ron, I—I can't stand it," she practically sobbed, and, beyond guilty that he'd forgotten what the Healer had said about Hermione's body being "hyper-sensitized," he yanked his head up from her chest and searched her face: She seemed close to tears, but he realized in that moment that the head of his aching cock was prodding at her slick inner thigh, and the heat coming off of her pussy was literally scorching him.

"Ermione, I'm sorry," he grunted, which caused her to merely shake her head, as if she was shaking off his apology.

"Please," she whispered again, her fingernails scraping down his nipples and stomach, eliciting a shudder from him, and the irony wasn't lost on him that she was practically begging him to shag her, which seemed a bit backwards. Shouldn't it be the other way around? "Ron, I—I need you—*now*," she added urgently, her face flushed prettily, but whether from desire or embarrassment, he couldn't be sure—maybe both—and then her searching hand closed around his dick, positioning him at her center.

Meeting her pleading brown eyes, Ron swallowed hard, dragging his hands down her ribcage and belly—her skin felt like silk and looked like cream—before placing them on her hips; her legs widened even further in response, wrapping around his waist, and the head of his dick dipped into her scorching, wet heat at her urging.

He was on the very threshold of thrusting into her like every instinct in his body demanded that he do, but he paused, wanting to...to soften this somehow, to make it less clinical, but mostly to reassure her that he wasn't doing this only because he *had* to, or because he was a pervy, randy git, but because he really, truly loved her. He wanted to tell her that, or at least kiss her properly, and he almost did so, but he didn't think she'd take well to it—not since he was technically still with Lavender. With a feeling like shame churning in his gut, he remembered the look on Hermione's face when she'd walked in on him and Lavender all those weeks ago, and he knew there was no way in bloody hell Hermione would be doing this if she wasn't out of her bleedin' mind 'cause of that barmy potion.

Before he could think on it further, though, Hermione made her impatience known: With an abrupt upward thrust of her hips, Ron's cock was suddenly plunged into slick, tight-as-fuck satin. The air was sucked out of his lungs at the sensation—it was the best fucking thing he'd ever felt—as she cried out his name beneath him, shuddering mightily while her body arched into his, and as he felt her tight muscles constricting around him, her limbs quaking violently, he realized with astonishment that she'd climaxed upon penetration.

As he pulled his hips back and thrust into her to the hilt once more, and Hermione's head fell back in an expression of ecstasy, her messy curls spreading about her pillow and her ankles locking around his waist, Ron knew he wouldn't last long—she felt too fucking good—but then he remembered that was okay, because she needed his cum to get better.

At that thought, and at Hermione's encouraging moans, he began sloppily colliding into her, watching her tits bounce and all the while thinking wildly, *I'm fucking Hermione. I'm actually fucking Hermione, and she's bloody loving it.* He was so far gone that he couldn't even feel any guilt about enjoying it, especially when Hermione's hands pulled one of his to her tit—his other hand was now braced by her head—and he fondled and plucked her breasts at her urging, and the next thing he knew, he was coming, *hard*, his hips slamming erratically into hers, spilling into her as she mewled her encouragement, her body milking him for all he had...

After the longest, most wickedly satisfying orgasm of his life, Ron collapsed next to her, out of breath, sweat cooling his heated skin. *Did that really just happen?* he thought, feeling dazed, as he turned his head to look at Hermione, confirming that it hadn't all just been one of his pervy dreams. *I really just shagged Hermione.* "You okay, 'Ermione?" he asked, his voice sounding thick to his own ears. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No—no, I'm fine, Ron," she said, a shy look on her face as she avoided looking directly at him. "More than fine, actually—I feel—I'm much better, thanks to you." True to her word, she wasn't panting or writhing like she'd been before; in fact, she looked bloody sexy as fuck with her skin all slickened and flushed from their lovemaking—if he could even call it that, which Ron wasn't so sure given the reason they'd done it to begin with.

Did she hate him now? More than she already had? Is that why she couldn't look at him? Or maybe she was disgusted by him and by what they'd had to do—and ashamed that her mind had been controlled by her body. Hermione shifted on the bed then, moving to cover herself as if just realizing that she was starkers, and just before she pulled the sheet over her legs, he caught a glimpse of his own cum on her inner thighs, and was that *blood*?

He was horrified for the space of an instant, sure that he'd hurt her and that she'd lied about it, but then he thought, *Duh, you prat—she was a virgin.* Shamefully, he remembered how he'd justified getting together with Lavender by telling himself that Hermione and Krum might've done the deed, but he'd known in his heart that it wasn't true.

At the realization that he'd taken Hermione's virginity in a bloody hospital room out of a medical necessity, Ron felt somewhat ill as the guilt churned in his stomach: She didn't deserve this. She

deserved...roses and candles, and all that other girly stuff that birds liked, not this sterile, clinical environment with a git who was still technically someone else's boyfriend.

Merlin, it was no wonder she didn't wanna bloody look at him.

And what if he really got her pregnant? She'd hate him for that, too.

Fuck.

"Ron?" she whispered suddenly, breaking into his thoughts. "It's starting again..."

Chapter 10: Point Taken

Chapter Ten: Point Taken

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

oOo

Harry Potter awoke abruptly, disoriented and slightly perplexed to realize that he was still wearing his glasses—he must've fallen asleep while reading the Prince's book again—which were now askew on his face, pressing uncomfortably into the bridge of his nose. As he sat up in bed and straightened his glasses, wincing against the bright orange glow of sunrise that invaded the dormitory and made his eyes ache, he glanced at the small clock on the nearby nightstand, noting that it was about halfway through breakfast.

As he stretched, yawning mightily, his mind lingered on the remnants of his dreams that were now quickly trickling away, like water through one's cupped palms: His hazy recollection remembered something about Draco Malfoy and Snape, and then there was something about Professor Slughorn, a young Voldemort, and the putrid little ramshackle house that had been inhabited by Marvolo Gaunt and his two children—but it was all jumbled together and nonsensical and disturbed. In fact, Harry felt like he hadn't slept at all.

Glancing about the dormitory, he saw that Dean's curtains were still drawn, his loud snores filling the room, but the other three beds were all empty and still unmade with their drapes thrown wide open. Neville was the solitary figure in the room, dressing at the foot of his bed and stifling a wide yawn. From the nearby loo, Harry could hear the water running, which he assumed must be Ron, since he'd started trying to avoid Lavender in the mornings and therefore always went downstairs with Harry. (As if Harry could conceal Ron's over six-foot, ginger-topped frame with his.)

"Morning, Harry," Neville acknowledged him in a sleepy greeting when their eyes met. "I thought about waking you earlier, but you seemed pretty out of it." Apparently noticing Harry's gaze flash toward Ron's empty four-poster, Neville added, "He was already gone when I woke up, Ron was. I reckon he must've gotten up early to hang out with Lavender before breakfast."

Not bloody likely, Harry thought with a frown, but abruptly his conversation with Ron the previous night came rushing back to his sluggish mind, and he was on his feet in a flash, tripping over his duvet and very nearly falling on his face in his haste. Diving toward his trunk in order to retrieve his freshly laundered uniform and robes—the house-elves really were efficient, weren't they?—he dressed quickly, experiencing a stab of annoyance that Ron had gotten up early to go see Hermione without him. Why wouldn't he have woken up Harry so that he could go, too? He knew that Ron cared about Hermione and everything, but if something was seriously wrong with her, then Harry reckoned he had a right to know about it as well—arguably more so than Ron did, since he, Harry, was actually still on speaking terms with her.

Stashing his wand, the Marauder's Map, his dad's cloak, and the Prince's book—all of his belongings that he didn't go anywhere without lately—inside inner pockets of his school robes, he ducked into the bathroom in order to hastily brush his teeth, all the while attempting to ignore Seamus, who was completely starkers, having just emerged from the shower and, disturbingly, was apparently trying to de-hair his bollocks by magic.

"What?" his dorm mate said somewhat defensively, noticing Harry glancing at him with a plain

expression of repulsion. "The ladies like it."

"You know, I heard that a bloke in Germany hexed off his own bollocks that way," Harry replied as he rinsed out his mouth before drying it on the back of his sleeve, "and I don't reckon he was very popular with the ladies after *that*." As Seamus's eyes widened in horror, Harry ducked back out of the bathroom, chuckling to himself despite his anxiety over Hermione.

Unsurprisingly, but rather annoyingly, Lavender was waiting at the foot of the stairs: "Hello, Harry," she said, rather too cheerfully as she peered over his shoulder as if expecting Ron to appear behind him at any moment. "Where's Ron?" she added, looking crestfallen with disappointment.

"Er...no idea." So it wasn't exactly the truth, but he wasn't too keen on being responsible for the drama that would result from telling her that her boyfriend had gone to see Hermione in the hospital. "Maybe he went to breakfast early?"

"But I didn't see him, and I've been down here for half an hour now."

Standing just behind her, Parvati's arms were crossed over her chest, an expression somewhere between impatience and annoyance on her face. "See, what did I tell you, Lav?" she hissed lowly at her best friend. "He doesn't think about you, he doesn't consider your feelings; you made yourself too *obvious*—"

"Sorry, you must've missed him," Harry said quickly, with an attempt at an apologetic shrug as he squeezed between the two girls, thinking that Parvati was right, but Harry wasn't about to get in the middle of it. "If I see Ron, I'll let him know you're looking for him." He then strode quickly toward the portrait hole in an effort to get away from Lavender before she decided that she fancied joining him.

Once he'd climbed out the entrance to the Gryffindor common room, he broke into a jog, dodging breakfast stragglers in his eagerness to reach the hospital. To his utter bafflement, however, when he came screeching to a halt in front of the infirmary's closed doors and pushed his way inside, it was to find the place utterly deserted: There was no sign of Ron or Hermione—or anyone else, for that matter.

Hoping that Madam Pomfrey wasn't still down at breakfast, or that she hadn't left yet, he jogged up the long aisle and knocked on her office door. To his relief she answered after only a few moments, wrenching the door open and standing there dressed for the day in her usual medical robes—but looking more haggard than normal, the circles under her eyes a deep shade of purple, as if she hadn't gotten much sleep the night before.

"What is it, Potter?" she asked, not quite shortly, but somewhat wearily—again, like she'd been up most of the night.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Madam Pomfrey, but I was wondering if you might know where Hermione Granger is? Ron Weasley told me last night that there was an accident, and that you'd seen her."

The elder witch regarded him for a moment, as if deliberating over what her response should be, before finally saying, "I did indeed see her, Potter, but she was moved to St. Mungo's to undergo treatment late last night, as there was nothing that I could do for her here."

"What—what's wrong with her?" he stammered, feeling stunned and a bit sickened, scared to think how bad it was if she'd been sent to St. Mungo's—and he couldn't help but think about Katie Bell. Even though McGonagall had said that Draco Malfoy had been serving a detention with her

the day of Katie's "accident," he was still convinced, now more than ever, that Malfoy was behind it. Could he possibly have had something to do with Hermione's accident as well? It was no secret that he despised her for being a Muggle-born, and Harry hadn't been able to locate him on the map last night.

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to discuss the exact nature of her condition," Madam Pomfrey was saying with a heavy sigh, "but her treatment should prove effective; I expect that she'll be back in class by tomorrow, or the next day at the latest."

"Yeah, but what—?"

"I would suggest that you discuss this with your Head of House," she cut in, not entirely unsympathetically, "although I can't promise you that Professor McGonagall will be able to tell you any more than I have."

Feeling more annoyed than anything, Harry thanked her before he turned and exited the hospital, heading for the Great Hall and feeling confident that Professor McGonagall would be at breakfast, and he thankfully wasn't disappointed: Though he was aware that it was unconventional for students to approach teachers during mealtimes, he nevertheless made his way across the Great Hall, glancing toward the Gryffindor House table as he passed and scanning the long benches for Ron, but he was nowhere to be seen.

He caught sight of Lavender and Parvati, across from Seamus and Neville, whispering to each other in a hushed but heated-looking manner; they were so caught up in their conversation that they didn't even seem to notice him pass. A bit further along the table he saw Ginny sitting next to Dean, but they weren't speaking to each other—which Harry was secretly pleased about—both apparently occupied by their breakfasts. Ginny smiled at Harry beatifically as he passed, and he couldn't help but smile back, thinking how pretty she looked in the bright sunlight illuminating her from the enchanted ceiling: She looked like a fiery-haired angel.

He had eyes only for Draco Malfoy when he walked by the Slytherin table who, like Lavender and Parvati, didn't seem to notice him as he sat hunched in his seat, shifting his food around with his fork, a sour expression on his face, which Harry found interesting: If he had had anything to do with Hermione's accident, shouldn't he be bragging about it to his cronies? It wasn't like him to pass up an opportunity to bask in glory. Unless, of course, he'd gotten smarter, which Harry highly doubted.

When he approached the teachers' table his eyes automatically sought out Dumbledore, who was unsurprisingly absent, as he so often was as of late. Ignoring Snape's dark, suspicious gaze, Harry walked right up to Professor McGonagall, who was conversing lightly with Professor Sprout.

"Excuse me, Professor," Harry said without preamble. "Sorry to interrupt, but Madam Pomfrey told me that you could tell me what happened to Hermione? I know from Ron that she had an accident last night, and Madam Pomfrey said she was moved to St. Mungo's, but that she couldn't say what exactly happened, but that you might be able to."

McGonagall regarded him much as Pomfrey had as she slowly placed her half-eaten toast on her plate and dabbed her lips with her napkin, and only then did he realize that she was just as weary as the school's Healer. "Let's speak in my office, Potter," she finally said before excusing herself and moving around the table to join him. "I should warn you, however, that what I have to say will not entirely satisfy your curiosity," she added before abruptly turning and marching between the long rows of tables and exiting the Hall, and Harry was forced to break into a light jog in order to keep up.

"Tea?" she asked once they were finally ensconced in the privacy of her office.

"No, thank you," Harry said a bit impatiently, eager for her to get to the point. "Professor, Ron said that a potion got into her blood through a cut on her foot," he prompted.

"Very well, Mr. Potter," she replied with a sigh, taking a seat behind her desk and indicating that he should sit as well. "While the potion affecting Hermione was created with...malevolent intents, she is currently being treated and will make a full recovery."

"Malevolent intents?"

"Potter, I am aware that she's your friend, but I'm afraid that it will be up to Hermione's discretion to relay further information, as the potion in question affects the exposed party on a...deeply personal level."

"Is Ron with her, then?" he asked, voicing the question that had been on his mind since he'd awoken to find his best mate gone from their dorm.

"I called on him in the night for his assistance, yes."

"What can Ron do to help?" He was feeling more baffled and frustrated by the minute. Ron got to know what was going on with Hermione, but Harry didn't?

"That is for Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley to divulge, should they choose to do so. Suffice it to say for the time being that because Mr. Weasley was present when her accident occurred that he was affected by the potion as well."

Harry stared at her momentarily as he processed what she was saying: Ron had been affected as well? He'd seemed a bit stunned last night, but other than that he'd seemed all right. "Can I see them?"

McGonagall sighed, a tad impatiently, as she replied, "I'm afraid that will not be possible, as it would interrupt Miss Granger's treatment, which is ongoing, but rest assured that they will both be back by tomorrow at the latest." She paused, taking on a sympathetic tone before adding, "I understand your frustration, Harry, but I can only reassure you that Ron and Hermione are being sorted out by the most reputable Healers in the country. I truly am regretful that I cannot be more specific than that, but they *will* make a full recovery, which you shall see for yourself very shortly; I received a report from St. Mungo's not an hour ago that all is going accordingly."

He nodded slowly, resigned to the fact that he wasn't going to get any more out of her, but feeling comforted nonetheless. "Thank you, Professor."

She smiled at him gently, the deep lines in her face smoothing a bit. "You're welcome, Potter. Now, if that was all that you required, you had best be going, lest we're *both* tardy for the first lesson of the day."

"Professor..." He hesitated as he stood, unable to resist commenting, "I couldn't help but notice that Professor Dumbledore was gone again..."

"What Professor Dumbledore chooses to impart to you is up to his discretion, of course," she said curtly as she picked up a quill from her desk, no longer looking at him as she focused on the parchment in front of her, and Harry recognized his obvious dismissal.

With a nod, he turned and left the room, his mind buzzing with what he'd learned—or what he hadn't, to be more accurate—and what it was that Hermione was being "treated" for, and what Ron's role could possibly be—

As he rounded a corner, dodging students on their way to class, he practically walked straight into Lavender Brown coming in the opposite direction. "Well, did you find out where he is, then?" she asked immediately as she blocked his path, effectively preventing him from slipping around her this time. There was an uncharacteristic stern expression on her pretty face, intermingling with the impatience there as she stood with her legs planted shoulder-width apart, her arms crossed over her chest.

"I—er—who?"

"Oh, don't pretend to be daft, Harry," she replied with an air of annoyance, swinging her long blonde hair over her shoulder and reminding him very much of Fleur in that moment. "I know you were asking McGonagall about Ron—and Hermione. Where are they? Are they together?"

"Lavender, I really think you should discuss this with Ron—"

"I would, but he isn't here, is he? Hence the problem."

He sighed heavily, thinking that he really didn't have time for this—he still had to run back up to his dorm to grab his bag—but he supposed she had as much of a right to know as he did, seeing as she was Ron's girlfriend and all. "Honestly, she didn't tell me much, all right? All I know is that there was an accident in detention last night, and now Ron and Hermione are both being treated at St. Mungo's—"

"But I saw him last night after detention! I spoke with him. He seemed to be in perfect health to me."

"I know, so did I, but apparently when they found out what the potion was they decided Ron needed to be treated, too, just to be on the safe side."

Lavender appraised him with a raised eyebrow for a moment, as if trying to decide whether he was lying or not as she adjusted her book bag over her shoulder. "What potion?" she finally said. "Is it serious? When will they be back? Can I see him?"

"Like I said, McGonagall didn't say much about the potion, but she said they'll be fine, that they should be back by tomorrow, and no one can see them because it'll interrupt their treatment. Really, that's all she'd tell me."

"Fine, I believe you," she said grudgingly as she tapped her foot. "Doesn't mean I'm at all happy about it, though."

"Look, if that's all..." Harry began somewhat awkwardly, not wanting to be insensitive but thinking that he was probably going to be late for class as it was, "I've still gotta get my bag from the dorm..."

"Oh. Right. Care for some company?"

"Er. Sure."

"Brilliant," she trilled happily as he took off, and she trotted along next to him. "So does Ron ever...you know...talk about me...?"

oOo

"Ron? It's starting again..." She winced at the neediness in her voice, experiencing an odd jumble of conflicting emotions that consisted mainly of humiliation, love, desperation, despair, joy, and all-encompassing, overwhelming desire.

The feeling of Ron's hot fluids on her inner thighs and even the soreness between her legs strangely aroused her, yet she was ashamed that her body was overpowering her brain. If there was one thing that Hermione prided herself on the most, it was the power of her mind, so the fact she had been reduced to little more than a bitch in heat whose one and only purpose was to breed—thanks to that barbaric potion, created by short-sighted Neanderthals—was completely humiliating; as was the fact that she had enjoyed the sex so thoroughly.

Although Ron Weasley was the right boy, this was most assuredly the wrong situation: She had never imagined that it would be like this—that they would be forced into such an intimate act because of a stupid, careless accident. She had always imagined that it would start with a kiss, and from there their physical and emotional relationship would evolve at a natural, unhurried pace (setting aside the urgency resulting from Voldemort's return, of course). She had never imagined that they would actually have sex before they'd ever even kissed—and she certainly hadn't expected that they would do so while Ron was dating someone else.

While there was an undeniable part of her that was overjoyed that she was actually here with Ron, the boy that she'd loved for the longest time, like this, she couldn't escape her nagging insecurities that told her that he was only doing this out of a sense of obligation, because he really could be noble when he wanted to be, and not because he desired her like that. Judging by the fact that Ron hadn't attempted to kiss her before, during, or after their intimate encounter, she was inclined to think that she had somehow misinterpreted his previous actions and the meanings behind the things that he'd said during their row.

In any case, he was still with Lavender, wasn't he? Maybe he'd even done this with her first, despite what he'd implied to the contrary, which would explain why he hadn't want to kiss her, Hermione. She was more than aware that she didn't measure up physically: She was embarrassingly bony, lacking in curves; her face was plain, and her hair was a bushy, brown mess. (Even though she supposed that she polished up nicely enough when she put some effort into her appearance, she still didn't quite comprehend why Viktor and Cormac had both seemed so attracted to her.)

And Ron seemed experienced enough, did he not? He'd known exactly how to touch her, and despite the initial pain of penetration, when it had felt as if her body was being ripped in half, that pain had somehow compounded her pleasure, and she'd had the most intense orgasm of her life in the moment that he'd entered her—that he'd taken her virginity. (Of course, logically she knew that her climaxing so readily had more to do with the fact that her body was so overly sensitized, rather than Ron's experience and sexual prowess.)

"Hermione?"

He was watching her as she clutched the sheet to her chest, her thoughts running rampant in a confused rush as her body hummed in that all-powerful, now-familiar mating call that just begged to be satisfied by Ron—the only person who *could* satisfy it, she instinctively knew, despite what the Healer had said about his brothers also being viable candidates.

She wanted to punch him. She wanted to snog him. Oh, God, she ached for him to shag her again as she glanced down the length of his body, studying him: He was long and lean, as she already knew from summers at the Burrow, his shoulders broad and his chest spattered with freckles and downy ginger hairs, the latter of which continued in a path down his tight stomach and led to a thatch of ginger hairs around his testicles and penis at the apex of his thighs; his delightfully thick length was already hardening and elongating again, glistening with the remnants of their previous intimate encounter and jutting proudly from his hips once more, as if he was aroused by the mere thought of being with her like that again—but that hardly made her special, did it? He was a young male, after all; he could undoubtedly perform if she happened to be Millicent Bulstrode—

even if he had to envision the likes of Lavender, Fleur, or Madam Rosmerta to get through it.

Her self-deprecating thoughts didn't prevent her from rubbing her thighs together in an effort to generate friction at the thought of being with him again; she had to restrain herself from reaching a finger down to run experimentally over his generous length—which she had found both intimidating and exciting when she had first lain eyes on it mere minutes ago. Despite her inexperience, she had, of course, seen drawings and photographs in books on human anatomy, but, in truth, she'd always thought human genitalia to be...well, strange-looking, visually unappealing. However, she found Ron beautiful, in every aspect.

Seeing where her eyes had wandered, Ron shifted on the mattress, climbing under the sheet with her, and Hermione turned toward him as if drawn to him like a moth to the flame, desiring nothing more than to meld into him and allow his warmth to absorb her. His blue eyes were dark with blatant desire and something like...adoration?...as he propped himself up on his elbow and gazed down at her with a tender, heavy-lidded expression that had her former insecurities melting away instantaneously and making her believe that she *hadn't* misunderstood his previous actions and implied admissions during their row after all—especially when he reached out and cupped her cheek in one large, calloused but warm palm while licking his full lips, as if in anticipation of her taste.

Her heart raced in excitement and longing as his eyes flashed toward her lips, and her breathing labored when she realized that he was thinking about kissing her; at least, that was what she *hoped* he was thinking about as he swiped his thumb gently across her cheekbone and then dragged it downward, lightly tracing her lips and eliciting a shuddering moan from deep within her throat as her body surged involuntarily, before he pressed the pad of his thumb firmly against her lower lip. When Hermione felt her lip pulse against his finger in time with the rapid tattoo of her heart, she fought the urge to draw that single digit between her lips and suckle on it in a similar manner that she secretly longed to suckle on another part of his anatomy. (She blushed hotly at that internal admission.)

"Merlin, you're beautiful," Ron breathed in a sexy, throaty manner that she'd previously heard only in her dreams—and which had her melting in more ways than one: Her core dampened and swelled for him inexorably as butterflies danced in her stomach, and she literally swooned. *Swooned.* She'd previously believed that that only happened to the damsels in distress from those drugstore paperback novels that her mother left lying about the house, but now she had actual experience to prove that such descriptions were, in actuality, based on fact. Who knew?

Quit thinking, and just feel, Hermione instructed herself as she closed her eyes, tilting her lips upward in anticipation of his kiss—

Quite unexpectedly, however, her mind's eye was besieged by visions of Ron snogging Lavender in the common room like it was going out of fashion, his hands all over her; of Ron cruelly mocking Hermione in Transfiguration before Christmas, as if he hadn't already been doing enough to hurt her (True, she'd laughed at the ridiculous mustache he'd given himself, but, then, so had Harry.); of Ron struggling to pull up his trousers that night that Hermione had walked in on him and Lavender...

The spell was broken, and Hermione turned her head at the last instant, with the result that his lips missed their mark, landing on the corner of her mouth instead.

Admittedly, perhaps she hadn't been completely flawless: Like Ron had said, she'd played her "little games" with Cormac McLaggen, not to mention that she'd actually physically attacked Ron, not once but twice: first with those canaries, and then with her fists. Additionally, she hadn't disclosed to him the full nature of her previous, albeit brief relationship with Viktor; even though she adamantly maintained that it hadn't been Ron's concern at the time, she should have told him

the truth once he'd agreed to go to the Christmas party with her, if only to clear the air. (Although, she highly doubted that he wouldn't have reacted with some amount of anger or jealousy.) She also knew that she shouldn't have assumed that Harry had put the Felix Felicis in his drink that day, but, as she had pointed out to Ron, *he* had made that assumption as well—which had been Harry's intention, obviously. Ron had *thought* that he was cheating at Quidditch, and yet he'd made no protestations; on the contrary, he'd seemed overjoyed by the prospect. On that matter, she had merely been attempting to keep him honest and true to himself, so where was the fault therein?

Lastly, perhaps Hermione should have made her intentions more obvious when she had invited Ron to the party—at least as obvious as Lavender had been, since apparently he required a slap across the face rather than a tap on the shoulder—but she had at least put herself out there, had she not? She had taken a risk by initiating the first step with him, and it had ultimately resulted in her getting her hopes up only to find Ron acting coldly toward her for *weeks* for reasons that he wouldn't even say, and then she had to put up with him repeatedly eating Lavender Brown's face all over the school.

Even though she stubbornly maintained that the whole situation had been *mostly* Ron's fault, she recognized in that moment that no one was to blame entirely for their falling out: There had been miscommunications and misunderstandings on both their parts, and while she also still believed that Ron was at further fault for continuing his relationship with Lavender when he didn't care about her like that, he was human and capable of making mistakes—just as Hermione was.

Nevertheless, she couldn't engage in the intimate act of kissing him until they had had an opportunity to discuss everything properly, without rowing, and Ron had broken up with Lavender. She may not be able to control what her body needed, but the rational portion of her brain *needed* to retain some amount of control despite the requirements of their predicament—and Ron needed to know that he couldn't kiss her when the air hadn't been cleared between them, and especially since he was still someone else's boyfriend.

As she examined those revelations from all angles, turning them over in her mind, her eyes drifted slowly open to find that Ron was gazing at her again; this time, however, his familiar features contained obvious distress at her rejection, and, despite the urgency of her physical state that increased by the moment, she felt the need to say something, *anything* to assuage the insecurities that were undoubtedly plaguing his mind.

Before she could offer any words of comfort, though, Ron was suddenly pulling away from her and scrambling for something on the floor, but then he was on the bed once more before she could question him, and, without preamble, his hands were on her body as he shifted back over her; it felt like an electric surge had jolted through her body at the moment his large hands had made contact with her skin. Furthermore, there was now something...animalistic and decidedly primal in his expression, intermingling with the hurt and confusion there, that both excited her and scared her somewhat.

She gave an involuntary yelp when his hands found her sensitized breasts, kneading them none-too-gently and pinching her nipples hard between thumb and forefinger as they groaned in unison, and he rose up onto his knees between her legs. From this new vantage point, she was afforded a clear view of his erect penis and the clear pre-ejaculatory fluid gleaming on the thick tip, and Hermione felt her chest heave as her inner muscles clenched in anticipation of fulfillment, her womb literally aching to be filled once more with his seed—

In a quick, abrupt motion, she found herself quite unexpectedly flipped over on the mattress, her face pressed into the pillow as his hands gripped her hips not quite roughly, dragging her backside into the air. "Ron, wha...?" she gasped in confused excitement as she craned her neck in time to

see that he had his wand out—that's what he'd picked up off the floor—and she watched him mutter an incantation, realizing as she felt the fluids on her inner thighs evaporate that he was cleaning up his own semen from her skin. After he'd tossed aside his wand a moment later, Hermione let out strangled cry of combined pain and pleasure when he suddenly drove his thick fingers into her core from behind, all the way to his knuckles.

The penetration was a bit painful due to residual soreness from the sex they'd had not minutes before—her muscles weren't at all accustomed to being stretched in such a manner—but it somehow felt so incredibly amazing all at once. When his thumb found her overly sensitive clitoris on every forward stroke of his fingers, the stimulation became almost unbearable, and her eyes rolled back in her head as the impending orgasm quickly mounted...

(The portion of her brain that was still capable of rational thought was terribly embarrassed about enjoying it so thoroughly, and she didn't even want to think about how...exposed she was in this position; the thought that Ron would have a clear view of her anus was simply too mortifying. However, such thoughts of propriety were obliterated by her primal need and the knowledge that any amount of modesty had long gone out the window.)

Abruptly and quite rudely, in Hermione's opinion, he pulled his fingers from her body, eliciting from her a dissatisfied whimper as her eyes fluttered open, and she looked over her shoulder at Ron: His eyes were closed in apparent ecstasy as he sucked and licked his fingers—the fingers that had just been inside her body. "Fuck, you taste good," he groaned, his tongue darting out to lick those full lips of his, as if he'd just sampled the most succulent chocolate confection on the face of the earth.

She moaned incoherently in response, finding the sight and his words incredibly arousing, and the ever-increasing ache in her womb built almost beyond the point of being merely uncomfortable. "Please, Ron...", she whispered, hating the sound of the words on her lips; it was so undignified that she was again begging him for sex, but he was torturing her, for heaven's sake... If he didn't get on with it already, maybe she *would* have him send for one of the twins, after all, she thought madly. She had no doubt in her mind that *they* would just shag her and be done with it.

When she turned her face back into the pillow, shamelessly arching her back in order to give him better access, she heard him hum in his throat as his hands covered her buttocks, squeezing them—and then something warm and wet latched on to her clitoris, sucking mightily...

"Oh...Oh! Ron...oh God...Ron, ungh...yesss...!"

She continued to mewl and grunt and pant nonsensically, all the while pushing herself backward against his face on instinct. Her hands fisted in the sheets as the pleasure built to an earth-shattering crescendo in response to the sensation of his lips and tongue clumsily licking and sucking the most intimate portion of her anatomy; once the pleasure had become acute to the point of being almost painful, she was suddenly free-falling over a precipice, her womb pulsating as her body was wracked with orgasmic gratification from the inside out, especially when his fingers rejoined the fray, ardently pumping in and out of her as her muscles contracted wildly around them.

Only when her peak had finally leveled off did she collapse, utterly satiated as the endorphins continued to surge through her veins, against the mattress; her satisfaction was short-lived, however, as the demanding throb in her womb only seemed to increase tenfold in response to her orgasm, and Hermione knew what she needed to make that ache go away. "Ron, now," she whispered shakily as she positioned herself on her hands and knees once more, arching her back for him as he continued to kneel behind her, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

Slowly, she felt his hands snake around her hips as his own hips shifted forward between her

knees, aligning himself with her. She closed her eyes then, biting her lower lip in anticipation of the mingled pleasure and pain that she knew was to come; she was almost giddy with excitement, and fairly ashamed by that fact.

"What d'you want?" he asked suddenly, his voice a low, sexy rasp.

"Excuse me?" she responded incredulously as her eyes snapped open and she peered at him over her shoulder yet again.

As his needy, lustful gaze locked on hers, his right hand slipped from her hip, and even though her own arse partially obscured the view, she could tell by the movement of his hand that he was stroking himself, and the idea made her literally salivate, that inexplicable urge to taste him coming back to her full-fold—and she might have given in to that desire had her body not had other ideas. "You want my cock, 'Ermione?" he literally growled—*growled!*—and Hermione's heart stuttered in her chest as her stomach gave a pleasurable little flip at his crude words—which was something that she had never imagined that she would ever find to be a turn-on, but it was. It really was.

His words replayed themselves in her head: *You want my cock, 'Ermione?*

In the next instant, she gasped when he pressed his hips forward slightly, dragging the hot, velvety head of his penis down her labia, his wetness intermingling with hers, and when it made contact with her throbbing clitoris, she nearly came again on contact as a whimper of frustration escaped her lips; even her breasts ached for him all over again.

"I'll give you what you want," he breathed, and Hermione was abruptly struck by how...self-assured he suddenly seemed in comparison to the awkwardness he'd exuded during their previous coupling. She was painfully aware that that confidence had a lot to do with the hurt that had replaced any lingering discomfiture on his part, and she knew that she ought to try to explain why she hadn't allowed him to kiss her, but her current state was rendering her incoherent. "Just tell me what you want, 'Ermione." As if to emphasize his point—pun most definitely intended—he then pushed just the head on his length into her folds, and her entrance stretched to accommodate him; he was close, so close...

"F-fuck me, Ron—p-please," she stammered, feeling torn between delirious lust by her own words and by Ron's dominance, embarrassment for enjoying said dominance, and annoyance at him that he could make her feel so many conflicting things all at once—but before she could think on it any further, Ron buried himself in her body with a mighty thrust of his hips, stretching her painfully yet deliciously, and Hermione knew completion for the second time.

Chapter 11: Hero of this Story

Chapter Eleven: Hero of this Story

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

oOo

"Ron? It's starting again..."

She was clutching the sheet to her bare chest, her breathing labored and her cheeks flushed as her eyes darted wildly about the semi-darkened room; she looked more vulnerable, more *scared*, somehow, in that moment than Ron could ever remember seeing her—and that idea unnerved him. Bloody hell, how could she look even more scared now than she had before...well, before they'd done...*that*?

Even though he'd never exactly pictured it happening like this in any of his fantasies—his imagination had conjured some pretty wild places, but never a bleeding hospital room—and he felt lingering guilt for taking her virginity like this, 'cause she'd bloody *die* if he didn't, there was also a part of him that couldn't help but feel elated, like what they'd done had been...well, right sodding beautiful, in spite o'the situation. Okay, so he felt like a bit of a tit for thinking that, but he didn't really give a rat's fart, 'cause being with Hermione like that had felt natural and good, and not just physically good—sheesh, he wasn't that much of a pervy, randy git; well, okay, maybe he was. Not that he was complaining about finally getting his cherry popped, 'cause *that* part had been pretty bloody wicked—but the fact that it was *her*, his Hermione, was what had his head in a cloud and his heart bloody soaring.

He loved her, and he reckoned he had for quite a while before he'd recognized those feelings, let alone admitted them to himself. Yeah, all right, so she was completely barmy and right scary at times, but she was also brilliant and perfect and amazing and beautiful, and there was a very real part of him that was right stoked by the mental image of Hermione all round and healthy and glowing with his, Ron Weasley's, kid. That image had been in the forefront of his mind since the Healer had told him what he had to do, and, in spite of their young age and all that other practical stuff that his mum and dad had gone on about, he couldn't help but secretly want that with her; fucking Merlin, he was already entertaining fantasies of putting a bloody ring on her finger—whether she ended up pregnant or not. And he wanted with all of his heart for her to want the same thing.

He hadn't been talking outta his arse when he'd told his parents and McGonagall that he'd marry her if she didn't bloody hate him.

But he knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't consider any of that stuff with him until this mess had all been sorted, and he'd ditched Lavender for good, and they'd discussed feelings until they were both blue in the face. That was, if she would even consider it *at all*, which Ron wasn't so sure about, given that he couldn't ignore the voice in his head telling him that Hermione was disgusted by him and would hate him forever when this was over and done, and that she was only acting this way because it's what her body needed, not what her head or her heart wanted.

If her need hadn't been so urgent, he reckoned he'd go back to Hogwarts at that very moment to break it off with Lavender—just to prove to Hermione that his heart was in this, and that he truly was capable of not being a prat on occasion.

"Hermione?" he whispered, wincing as his voice cracked in the middle of her name, making him sound like a bleedin' wanker. He wished that she would just tell him what she wanted him to do; she'd said it was "starting again," but now she was just sitting there looking scared, which was hardly encouraging. *Bloody hell, woman.*

Studying the soft lines of her face in the dim lighting, he noted that she was breathing raggedly through her slightly parted lips, and he watched on as her eyes flickered toward him and slowly drifted down his body in a look of obvious lust despite the intermingled vulnerability in her face. Her pink tongue darted out to lick her plump lips as her eyes lingered on his dick, causing said body part to stir reactively. Ron's ears burned beneath the intensity of her scrutiny as she stared at his cock with an expression that suggested that it was a bloody ice cream cone—that thought of which evoked images of Hermione licking it as such, and suddenly he was as hard as a rock again.

He suppressed a groan, watching the way she bit her lower lip in clear embarrassment and studying the way her chest and neck flushed deeply pink as she continued to clutch the sheet against herself. He again experienced that overwhelming urge to do something—anything—to put her at ease, to show her that he wasn't doing this because he *had* to, but because he truly loved her and wanted to be the one to go to sleep next to her every night and wake up beside her every morning; he wanted the nagging and the nappie-changing, the rows and the make-up sex, all the normal things of a typical married couple.

Bloody hell, he knew he must've gone around the twist for wanting these things at his age—the twins would be appalled and would take the piss for sure—but now that the idea had been planted in his head, it had taken root, and he couldn't shake it—not that he bloody wanted to. He wanted to take a chance for once; he wanted to prove to himself that he belonged in Gryffindor House, dammit, and that he deserved to get the girl, that he didn't always have to play the role of the sidekick.

He could be the hero of this story.

Sod it. Swallowing his pride and screwing up his courage, Ron pushed aside his own crippling fear of rejection and quickly climbed under the sheet with her, before he could lose his nerve. As her body turned toward him, he took that as a good sign and propped himself up with his elbow, hovering over her as his eyes met hers: They were the familiar color of chocolate, filled with yearning, uncertainty, and hope as her breathing labored in response to their eye contact, and, feeling emboldened, he reached out to cup her soft, warm cheek.

He studied the smooth skin of her familiar face while tracing the curve of her cheekbone with the pad of his thumb. From this close up he could make out the light spattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose, which he'd always found endearing, and as his thumb traveled lower, trailing over her lips, he marveled at the perfection of their shape—they weren't too big, but just plump enough and ripe for kissing—and at their softness. As he pressed his thumb against her lower lip, feeling it pulse in time to her heartbeat, he wondered if her flesh would feel like rose petals against his own lips when he kissed her...

She really was fucking beautiful, and the sad thing was that he knew that she didn't even know it. He wanted to remedy that by telling her, and so he did: "Merlin, you're beautiful."

Wait, did he just call her "Merlin"? Whatever. It didn't matter, 'cause her eyes had closed, and her chin was tilting upward, and Ron swallowed hard in nervous anticipation, recognizing the clear invite. *This is it*, he thought as he lowered his lips to meet hers; he was finally going to know what she tasted like, something he'd wondered since at least third year, when he'd been a randy but confused thirteen-year-old and had first started wanking himself stupid to thoughts of her.

He didn't know how he could possibly be nervous, since they'd just bloody shagged, for Merlin's sake, but he was, because this meant something decidedly more. This wasn't part of his "requirement" to make her better; this was the first step to all of his dreams coming true, her reciprocation proof that she didn't hate him after all, and that maybe, just *maybe* she wanted the same things as him, even after what he'd put her through with Lavender...

His own eyes had fluttered closed as his lips bridged the distance between hers, but instead of feeling the silky caress of her mouth on his, he experienced confusion when his lips collided with her cheek instead. Baffled, he opened his eyes to see that her head was turned away from him on the pillow, her eyes still closed.

His heart sank as his world turned to gray, and he realized that he'd somehow, stupidly misinterpreted her intentions: She hadn't wanted him to kiss her at all—or she'd at least come to her senses at the last moment, her brain having caught up with her.

As the reality of the rejection set in, humiliation burned his ears and clouded his thoughts. *What did you expect?* he thought to himself angrily, feeling dumber than he ever had in his life. *You think she'd wanna kiss you after what you did with Lavender? After what she saw you doing with Lavender?*

Even though the rejection wasn't all that surprising, considering, he couldn't stop the accompanying sting at the truth that this wasn't anything personal; she wasn't doing this with him because she wanted to, but because she *had* to—because she'd die if she didn't.

At that instant, Ron truly realized that he was here to do a job, nothing more, just like the Healer had said. His stupid fantasies about marrying her and all that other stuff were just that—stupid, juvenile, and had no basis in reality. What the hell would Hermione Granger want with a poor, second-rate wanker like him, anyway? He wasn't smart or good-looking, and he admitted to himself grudgingly that he was a mediocre Quidditch player at best; he reckoned he was all right when his head wasn't fucked, but that was a rare occasion, wasn't it? (Bloody hell, he'd needed to *think* he was cheating in order to be on form.)

Even though he'd known it in his heart all along, it really hit him in that moment that he had nothing to offer her. He reckoned that the only sorta bird that would ever want a bloke like him was one that was too daft to know better. Someone like Lavender.

Well, if he was here to do a job, then Ron was determined that he would do the best bloody job that he could; he'd fuck her, just like she needed him to, and then he'd let her get on with her life—without him. Just like she bloody wanted.

Even as he pulled away from her, rolling off of the bed and scrambling on the floor with shaky hands for his wand, he found himself wondering if she'd let him be in the baby's life if she got pregnant as a result of this; maybe she'd feel that he was too incompetent, too immature to be a father—and maybe she'd be right to think so. He tried not to think about the possibility his own flesh-and-blood child growing up calling another man "Dad," 'cause that thought was almost too much for him to bear.

He pushed aside that disturbing thought as he climbed back on the bed and settled between her knees. With renewed determination to get his "job" done, he ran his hands over her lush body without waiting for further invitation, kneading the heavy weight of her perfect tits and rolling her nipples. Spurred on by her groans of encouragement, he rose onto his knees, wanting to try something he'd always fantasized about—and it was now or never, wasn't it? Chances were, he'd never be with Hermione like this again, and since he had a duty to perform anyway, he reckoned he might as well enjoy himself.

Overcome by a rush of acute lust when her heavy-lidded gaze latched onto his cock once more, Ron reached down abruptly, flipping her onto her stomach and dragging her hips into the air. "Ron, wha...?" she gasped as he was faced with her perfectly round little arse.

He'd always loved Hermione's arse; he'd wanked more times than he could count to thoughts of bending her over and shagging her from behind. In fact, he had a favorite daydream involving her school uniform and a desk, but the reality of the sight of her pink, smooth-looking bum as her back arched to give him better access was so much better than anything his adolescent imagination could conjure.

Using his wand to quickly clean up his cum and the blood from her hymen, Ron then tossed it aside before giving in to the urge to slip two fingers deeply inside her tight little pussy; he had no idea what he was doing, but he took her cries and moans of encouragement to mean he must be doing *something* right as he pumped his fingers in and out of her body, flicking her clit experimentally on every forward stroke.

'Course, he reckoned the fact that her body was so sensitized made up for the fact that he really had no bloody clue what he was doing, but *fuck*. This was so fucking hot. She was the hottest little thing he'd ever seen, and she was so sodding *wet*. His fingers were coated with her juices as he finger-fucked her from behind, and he abruptly experienced an overwhelming urge to know what she tasted like.

Hermione gave a little strangled groan of protest as he pulled his fingers from her body and began lapping and sucking up her juices from his fingers; his eyes fluttered closed at her taste. *Fucking hell*. He was so fucking turned on. "Fuck, you taste good," he groaned as he smacked his lips, thinking that he'd take this over chocolate any day of the week. Forget pudding—he'd just eat Hermione for dessert from now on. She could just climb up on the table and spread her legs for him, and he'd—

Eat Hermione.

His eyes snapped open, and he was faced with her beautiful arse and the swollen, tempting lips of her juicy sex once more. *Fuck*. He wanted to taste her directly from the source; she may've denied him access to her other lips, but he had a hunch that she wouldn't refuse him kissing these lips...

"Please, Ron...", she whispered almost desperately, arching her back even more dramatically, and Ron lost it; completely overwhelmed with lust, he decided to test his theory as he covered her plump arsecheeks with trembling hands, squeezing as he dipped his head forward, aiming for the little pink bud of her clit—

She let out a stream of nonsensical noises while he suckled and licked her clit before dragging his tongue upward, lapping up her juices from her cunt as his lips finally met her nether ones—and, just like he'd predicted, she didn't once protest. The idea that she'd let him kiss her like *this*, but not properly—on the mouth—embittered him somewhat, but he was too ridiculously turned on to linger on it as he gripped her bum with one hand while finger-fucking her with the other, all the while lapping, flicking, and sucking clumsily, inexpertly with his tongue and lips...

Next thing he knew, she was mewling, his name falling from her lips in strangled, breathy cries as she bucked against his face and her tight muscles rapidly squeezed his fingers...

At long last, she let out a sigh of contentment, her body going limp as she collapsed against the mattress; her hair was a tangled mess of curls scattered across the pillow as he pulled his fingers from her body and wiped his mouth on his forearm. Scarcely a moment had passed before she was on her hands and knees before him once more, her breathing shaky as she whispered, "Ron, now."

That bitter feeling returned as he hesitantly snaked his hand around her hip, positioning his rock-hard dick against her bum; he couldn't ignore the nasty voice in the back of his head whispering that he was good enough for *this*—for fucking her—but he wasn't good enough for kissing her, or being with her. Even though the rational part of his mind knew what she must be thinking—that he was still with Lavender and all that—he couldn't stifle the strongest of his emotions: his overwhelming feelings of inadequacy and the dirty feeling of being used.

Although he'd agreed to this unquestioningly, and he'd do anything, absolutely *anything*, to save her life, and, okay, she'd never bloody promised him a damned thing, he wanted her to tell him what she wanted from him; he wanted her to actually say the words. He reckoned it was the very least she could do for him, considering what he was doing for her. "What d'you want?"

"Excuse me?" Hermione replied, her voice bewildered as she met his eyes over her shoulder.

In response, Ron's hand slipped from her hip, and he gripped his dick, stroking it once, twice, three times; his pre-cum was leaking from the tip, and it was taking all of his self-control to stop himself from plunging inside her and pounding into her 'til he exploded, he was so bleedin' horny.

"You want my cock, 'Ermione?" he insisted; he needed her to say it.

Unable to resist, he dragged the head of his dick down her sopping-wet slit before using it to toy with her clit, which had her gasping in obvious anticipation, her small fists gripping the sheets. "I'll give you what you want—just tell me what you want, 'Ermione." With those words, he pushed into her folds barely an inch, his eyes nearly rolling back in his head at the sweet constricting sensation as his hands tightened on her hips... *Sodding hell*. She'd better say the words soon, 'cause he was about to fuck her raw...

"F-fuck me, Ron—p-please."

He didn't hesitate: The instant the words left her lips, he buried himself in her fuck-tight heat, and Hermione screamed his name, her inner walls constricting around him as she immediately came again, which only spurred him on. "Ungh, *fuuuuck*...I'm fucking you," he grunted as his hips slammed erratically against her arse, the wet, slapping sounds of flesh-on-flesh filling the room as he watched his dick sinking inside her again and again. The vision excited him, and she felt way too fucking good; he was a bit embarrassed that he was gonna come again so soon, but there wasn't much to be done about that.

Ron pulled out of her on sudden inspiration, quickly flipping her onto her back before pulling her right thigh over his shoulder: He wanted to see her face when he came in her, when he gave her what she needed. "Look at me," he grunted, and, once her eyes had fluttered open, focusing on him, he completed them in a sharp thrust. They groaned in unison as he began fucking her deeply from this new position, and it was only a few moments before she was climaxing yet again, clinging to him like her life depended on it—which it did, he remembered—as her eyes rolled back in her head and her mouth formed a perfect little "oh."

"I'm gonna fucking come in you, 'Ermione," he groaned as he pounded into her, and her inner walls continued to squeeze his dick in an impossibly tight vice, and it was almost too much for him to take—and then he was coming as well, spilling deeply into her while she clutched him to herself almost desperately—

And then he collapsed on top of her, feeling spent and exhausted as his head rested against her bare breast, his breathing labored.

"Ron," she whispered, her arms tightening around him, her fingers threading in his sweat-dampened hair, and the tenderness in her voice nearly had him bursting into unexpected tears.

Fucking hell, he thought as he forced aside his body's sudden demand for an emotional release with a sheer force of will; the last thing he wanted to do was *cry* after sex with her, like a bloody tit—but that didn't really matter, did it? Had he really just gone all caveman on her and fucked her like she was some sort of...of scarlet woman?

Despite all the stuff he'd been feeling, she didn't deserve that. Hermione deserved to be made love to, not to be shagged like a common slag. After all, she hadn't asked for this; she hadn't meant to be exposed to that potion.

Bloody hell, he really was the world's biggest prat, wasn't he?

At that moment, he realized there was wetness on his face: Brilliant, and now he was bloody crying.

"Ron? It's not that I didn't want you to kiss me... You have to know that."

oOo

Her arms tightened around him, her fingers threading through his hair as his body began to quake, and Hermione realized with a rush of guilt that he was crying—and she was aware that it was entirely her fault. She hadn't intended to hurt him, and the knowledge that she *had* hit her with all the subtlety of a lightning strike. "Ron? It's not that I didn't want you to kiss me... You have to know that." *Please know that*, she silently begged him as tears formed in her own eyes, but she brushed them away quickly, lest he think that he had hurt her.

Ron leaned up in order to hover over her, supporting his weight on one forearm next to her head as he peered down at her. Just as she'd suspected, his eyes were red, and there were tears glittering in his blond lashes, but he was now swiping at them furiously with one hand, as if embarrassed by them. He appeared vulnerable and young at that moment, very much his not-quite-seventeen years, and, as Hermione reached up to wipe the fringe from his eyes, she thought back to three months ago, before the Lavender incident, when it had seemed as if she and Ron had been on the cusp of something; she thought back to the previous summer, to the walks in the garden, the swims in the pond, and the quiet evenings in his bedroom.

"I've missed you," she whispered suddenly, leaning up on impulse to lightly kiss a pattern of freckles above his pectoral, a spot that she'd always secretly desired to kiss, very aware of the fact that their bodies were still connected in the most intimate manner possible—and of the stickiness there, resultant of their intermingled bodily fluids. The muscles between her legs were sore to a point almost beyond mere discomfort, but it was a far cry better than the pain that had stemmed from her womb before. Besides, the soreness served as a reminder of what she had experienced with Ron—and she didn't regret it, she realized quite abruptly. It may not have been an ideal situation for either of them, but she didn't regret a single moment of being with him.

"I've missed you, too," he said, his voice thick with emotion as his blue eyes burned into hers. "Hermione, I'm so sorry about...y'know...about Lavender...and about just now. I-I don't have an excuse, other than the fact that I'm a complete arse, and you deserve better. And—and I know why you wouldn't let me kiss you. It's because of Lavender, right? If you didn't need me here, I'd go and break up with her right now if it'd make a difference. Bloody hell, I'll break up with her even if it *won't* make a difference, 'cause I can't bloody be with her anymore—not after this."

She regarded him silently, all of the things that she had wanted to say to him for so long flitting through her mind in rapid succession—but now wasn't the time for the discussion that they so desperately needed to have, as the telltale ache in her womb had already begun to build yet again. Instead of saying one of the many things that had been on her mind for months, Hermione settled

for smiling gently and silently nudging him, indicating that he should roll onto his back. He appeared slightly confused, but he complied nevertheless, rolling over and pulling her with him in a fluid movement—and she was abruptly straddling him, their bodies still connected, his penis beginning to stir once more inside her.

"Apology accepted, Ron," she whispered simply. "When this is over, and you've broken up with Lavender, we'll sit down and discuss everything properly—without rowing. Agreed?"

He nodded, looking infinitely relieved. "Yeah, all right, sorted."

"Brilliant." She experienced a moment of giddy elation at the knowledge that she and Ron both seemed on the same page for once, but that feeling was short-lived as a matter of paramount significance occurred to her: "Ron, if I—if we, I should say, become...pregnant..." Her face burned as she forced the words out. In truth, the possibility frightened her; she had, naturally, always assumed that she would finish school and have a career before starting a family, but the idea seemed especially dismal now that Voldemort had returned. Yet it wasn't something that could simply be ignored: She could very realistically have Ron's child—and much sooner than she had ever imagined.

She watched his eyes widen perceptibly as he stared up at her, his breath hitching in his throat. "Hermione, I wanna be there...for you and—and the baby," he finally said, his voice cracking the way it did when he was particularly nervous. "I mean, if...y'know...if you'll have me..." His ears had become deeply scarlet, and he was no longer looking directly at her, but focusing somewhere over her shoulder.

"Yes," she said quickly, unsure of exactly what she was agreeing to: He could be proposing marriage or simply be asking if he could be in the baby's life, but it didn't matter because the answer was "yes" either way. "Yes, of course, Ron." True, they had multiple issues to work through, but her feelings for Ron had never once faltered; even after everything that had transpired between them these last months, when she had envisioned her future, he had always been present.

Suddenly, Hermione realized that they had been speaking as if "the baby" was an inevitability rather than a mere possibility, but Ron didn't seem frightened by that distinction. Quite the contrary, he was becoming fully aroused once more, filling and stretching her somewhat painfully yet deliciously in their current position.

"Oh, about that other thing that you apologized for," she whispered, her eyes drifting shut as she reveled in the sensation of her body impaled on his, "the love we just made—don't be sorry for that. I'm not. I quite enjoyed it, actually." She set aside her own embarrassment educed by her abrupt surge of boldness, instead enjoying his reactive groan as he reached up, cupping the swell of her breasts in his palms as he gazed at her through half-closed eyelids.

Hermione gasped in a spike of renewed desire when his thumbs lazily circled her nipples before his hands dragged a downward path over her skin, settling on her hips and squeezing gently. Leaning down, she swirled her tongue over his small, pink nipple experimentally, delighting in the little shuddering gasp it elicited from her lover.

Her lover.

The idea that Ron Weasley was now her lover was enough to make her heart soar with joy, and so she made love to him leisurely—she was quite tender, after all—demonstrating by her actions all of the things that she had yet to say to him and marveling at the feeling of being joined with him—both physically and emotionally.

As she rode them both to earth-shattering completion, their bodies pulsing together before she

finally collapsed, exhausted but satiated, on his chest, Hermione had no idea what tomorrow would bring, but, even though they had yet to discuss things at length, she now felt confident that she wouldn't be facing it alone.

oOo

"Ermione," he whispered, and she felt his lips press against the top of her head as his calloused hands gently stroked her back. "Love you so fucking much."

Her breathing hitched at his emotionally charged declaration, tears springing abruptly to her eyes, and she fought the urge to pinch herself; this was really happening. She was actually here with Ron, and he had just declared his love for her.

Overjoyed, she leaned up in order to meet his eyes, on the verge of reciprocating the sentiment when she came to an unexpected realization: The ache in her womb was gone. It hadn't simply lessened like it had after the first two times they'd had sex, but had actually disappeared altogether.

"What is it?" he asked, apparently sensing the change in her demeanor.

She rolled off of him then, sitting up in bed and clutching the sheet to herself as she concentrated on her body's signals. "It's the potion," she finally said after several moments, when nothing had changed. "I-I think it's neutralized."

"Wait, what? Already?" He had sat up next to her, his eyebrows knitted together in an expression of puzzlement. "I thought the Healer said it could take hours..."

"Yes, she said that it *could* take hours, not that it necessarily *would*..." Her voice trailed off as something occurred to her: Perhaps the potion was only successfully neutralized once its purpose had been fulfilled. From what she had read about human reproduction, from the time of ejaculation it took healthy sperm thirty to sixty minutes to reach the fallopian tubes, and another four hours to breach the barrier of an egg...but with this potion, there was no telling; perhaps it had the ability to speed up the process.

"Hermione?" He was staring at her, a look of concern now etched on his familiar features.

"Call the medi-witch," she whispered. "Call the medi-witch now."

Chapter 12: Fight or Flight

Chapter Twelve: Fight or Flight

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

oOo

"How are you feeling, Hermione?"

"Good," she replied nervously, aware of the hot, embarrassed flush of her cheeks as she sat stiffly on the edge of the hospital bed, plucking at the hem of her favorite dressing gown, which had been brought over from Hogwarts by Professor McGonagall, along with some of her other personal items. "Better, actually," she added in an attempt at confidence, clearing her throat as she shot a nervous glance at Ron: He was now redressed in his jeans and t-shirt, perched in the chair at her bedside with his elbows resting on his knees. Hermione shot him a timid smile when he reached over and took her hand, giving it a supportive squeeze. *It'll be all right*, he seemed to say with his tight-lipped smile, which was belied somewhat by the apprehension that was written all over his face, despite his reassurances of his desire to be there for her in the event of a pregnancy.

When her eyes fell to his full, slightly chapped lips, she was abruptly assailed by images of Ron's mouth and large hands on her body, and by the all-too-recent memory of the telltale sound of skin slapping against skin filling this very room. Though Hermione had cleaned herself up when she'd relieved herself minutes before, the evidence of their encounter lingered in the pronounced tenderness between her legs, and in the purplish marks she'd noticed on her throat when she'd checked her reflection in the mirror beneath the harsh lighting in the loo.

Despite those physical reminders, however, it hadn't quite sunk in that what had transpired between them hadn't merely been one of her more explicit fantasies, but that it had actually happened—and he had really told her that he loved her.

'Ermione, love you so fucking much.

The words bounced around in her head, and she found that she didn't even mind the associated profanity, because it was so *Ron*, and the sentiment therefore rang that much truer. When their eyes met, she looked away from him quickly, feeling suddenly shy as she chewed the inside of her lip, and her body warmed beneath the heat of his gaze.

"That's encouraging, then," Miranda said brightly, and Hermione was pulled from her thoughts as the medi-witch glanced between the two of them before looking down at the clipboard in her hand. "Exposure to *Servus Sponsae* is literally unheard of these days, so we weren't entirely certain what to expect, but let's take a look, shall we?"

The young medi-witch held her wand aloft, and Hermione shifted back on the bed obediently and laid down on the sheets—which Ron had hastily cleaned with a quick *Tergeo* charm—placing her arms by her sides as Miranda waved her wand over Hermione's abdomen. The younger witch held her breath, positively petrified as the medi-witch's eyes flashed toward her clipboard, which Hermione was aware from her routine medical check-ups provided a diagnostic read-out.

"Well, your hormone levels are stabilizing, which is a good sign, and your heart rate and breathing are returning to normal, which indicates that the intercourse has indeed done its job," she

announced after a few moments, her brow furrowed in concentration. "I know there wasn't a lot of time for detailed explanations before," the medi-witch added as she continued to wave her wand over Hermione, throwing a glance at Ron, "but if it was as simple as a sperm sample or two, then quite frankly we would've just sent you into the loo with a plastic cup."

As Ron and Hermione both flushed hotly, studiously staring straight ahead and avoiding the other's gaze, Miranda plowed on as if she hadn't noticed: "From what we understand, pheromones exuded from both the male and female are required to trigger additional hormones in each other in order for the solution to work, such as PEA or phenylethylamine, which is a stimulant that activates other neurotransmitters such as noradrenaline, aka the 'fight or flight' response to raise heart rate, breathing rate, flush the skin, et cetera. I know it's a bit complicated, but all the factors have to be in synchronization in order for the semen to be an effective antidote."

"Yes, Healer Thorson gave a similar explanation when I asked her why Ron couldn't simply provide samples," Hermione responded matter-of-factly while Ron merely gaped at the medi-witch as if she'd just spoken a foreign language.

However, before he had time to ask her to repeat it in layman's terms, Miranda said, "Ah, here we are," while she stared at her clipboard, and Hermione's heart hammered in her chest as she held her breath; she felt Ron's hand slip into hers once more, his fingers wrapping around hers in a reassuring squeeze. "I assume Healer Thorson explained that the potion causes 'hyper-ovulation'? Well, in a woman's normal cycle," the medi-witch explained, clearly more for Ron's benefit than Hermione's, "only one egg reaches maturity and is released during ovulation, but, thanks to *Servus Sponsae*, Hermione actually released *six* eggs, and...it looks like sperm have already breached three of them; more accurately, the sperm have breached the cumulus oophorus of the eggs, but they still have to successfully penetrate the zona pellucida, which could take several hours, assuming they succeed. Of course, most sperm fail to attach properly and simply bounce off, so... looks like there's nothing more to do but wait and see what happens."

Hermione nodded slowly as she took in this information, not daring to chance a glance at Ron, her hand clammy where it was still clasped in his. "So...so the chances of—of a sperm,"—she couldn't help but blush at the word because of the fact that they were talking about *Ron's* sperm, even as she tried to be pragmatic about the situation—,"successfully attaching...I-I mean, does this mean I'm definitely going to become pregnant, then?" It felt like a daft question, but she wanted to be absolutely positive that she had understood correctly.

"It looks that way, yes," Miranda said kindly but a bit awkwardly as she glanced between them.

"A multiple birth is also a high probability. Like I said, so far three eggs have already been breached, although that's no guarantee that they'll all necessarily be fertilized, and then, of course, implantation takes several days to occur—that's when the fully formed embryo implants itself in the uterus."

"Well," Ron finally said, his voice uneven, and, as Hermione finally dared to look at him, she saw that he was as red-faced as she imagined herself to be. "Wow," he added once he'd cleared his throat, "I mean—that's...wow. More than one baby?" His voice was rather more high-pitched than usual.

"It's a high probability," she repeated sympathetically. "We'll find out for sure in a few hours, so in the meantime I think you two could use nourishment and some sleep. Ron, we've prepared a room for you next to Hermione's that I'm sure you'll find comfortable; if you'd like to go there now, I'll have some food brought up once I've examined Hermione."

Ron stiffened at this abrupt dismissal, clearly caught off guard. It was obvious that he didn't want to leave her side, but it would've been inappropriate for him to stay for her examination, despite the intimacy that they'd so recently shared. "I'll be fine," she assured him, interjecting confidence

into her voice as she squeezed his hand. "Eat, get some rest. I'm in good hands."

For the briefest instant, something flashed in his eyes—something very similar to the look of rejection on his face in the moments after she had denied his kiss—but then it was gone as quickly as it had come, and Hermione couldn't help but wonder if she'd imagined it. It was quite possible that exhaustion was rendering her delusional.

"I'll be right next door if you need me," Ron said softly, seeming to hesitate before coming to a quick decision and bending to plant his lips gently against her forehead. He then withdrew hastily, rising to his impressive height as he turned to face the medi-witch: "You'll let me know... y'know...if..."

"You may be present when the test is performed, if you'd like—assuming Hermione doesn't mind, of course."

"I don't," she said quickly. "I mean, of course he'll be here. He's just as involved in this as I am."

Miranda smiled. "In that case, Ron, I suggest you get some rest once you've eaten, and we'll wake you when it's time. Oh, and just so you know, Healer Thorson advised your parents to go home and get some sleep, but your mother assured us that she'll be back first thing in the morning."

"Yeah, that sounds like Mum," Ron said, his lips forming a wistful lopsided grin. "For all her talk about young parenthood, I bet she's been up all night knitting booties and dreaming about 'er first grandkid."

Hermione forced a smile at his words, but her stomach gave an unpleasant little flop as she subconsciously plucked at the hem of her dressing gown. *Young parenthood. Grandkid.*

This was all happening much too quickly. She was seventeen years old; she wasn't ready to be a mother. And what about Voldemort? How could Hermione, in good conscience, bring a child into this world while knowing what was coming?—The inevitable war that was brewing? And what if—it was too horrible to think, but she was a realist, after all, and therefore couldn't simply ignore the possibility—what if they lost? If she had a child, or children, what sort of world would she be bringing them into?

The thought made her insides clench in dread.

"Hermione? Are you all right?"

She looked up as she realized that he was frowning at her and experienced a stab of guilt at the direction her thoughts had taken, when Ron had been so wonderful and selfless throughout this entire ordeal, even stating that he wanted to be there for her and the baby—and in the moment that he'd spoken those words she'd caught a glimpse of the man that he was on the verge of becoming. Furthermore, the fact that they hadn't kissed properly weighed heavily in the air between them, and she felt lingering guilt for her rejection, even though she knew that she had to remain true to herself.

"I'm fine, Ron," she assured him, forcing another smile even though she no longer felt like smiling. Now that her overwhelming need and the danger triggered by her "condition" had subsided, reality was beginning to set in, and Hermione wasn't so certain that she was ready for whatever was to come.

"If you say so." He was clearly unconvinced, that frown still puckering his brow, but he thankfully didn't persist. "Well, see you in a bit, then." With a final glance in her direction, he was gone, leaving Hermione alone with Miranda, who was now pressing a glass of water into her

hands.

"You should hydrate," the medi-witch urged gently, and Hermione gratefully accepted the glass and downed its contents, ignoring the rivulets spilling over her chin: She hadn't realized how utterly parched she had been until that moment.

"Thank you," she said a bit breathlessly, wiping her mouth on her sleeve.

"You're welcome. I'm going to examine you real quickly now, if that's all right. Would you mind sliding to the end of the bed?" At that instant, stirrups appeared at the foot of the bed with a flourish of her wand.

"Oh—all right," Hermione said, attempting to stifle her nervousness. Though she had known this was coming, she felt somewhat reluctant since she'd never been examined...like *that* before, as her check-ups in the magical world had involved nothing more than a wave of a wand over her lower abdomen. Additionally, the fact that she'd just had sex somehow made the prospect all the more mortifying. Swallowing hard, she slid to the end of the bed as directed, repressing the urge to squeeze her thighs together and instead placing her feet in the stirrups as she stared at the ceiling. The lights were turned to their brightest setting, and she concentrated on counting the cracks in the yellowish plaster tiles.

"There's a bit of bruising," Miranda announced after a moment, "which is normal, of course. Are you in any pain?"

"A—a bit."

"All right, I'm going to heal you up now..." Immediately, a warming sensation enveloped Hermione's intimate flesh, and the relief she experienced as the soreness evaporated was almost instantaneous. "There, all done," the medi-witch said cheerfully as she straightened back up, Vanished the rubber gloves she was wearing, and sanitized her hands. "I'm just going to update Healer Thorson on your status, and I'll get you a potion for any lingering muscle soreness and something to help you sleep. Feel free to shower and dress, and I'll change your sheets when I come back. Now, what would you like to eat?"

As if on cue, Hermione's stomach gave a loud rumble, and, as she sat up in bed, pulling the hem of her dressing gown back over her thighs, she realized that she was famished. "Oh...um... whatever the kitchen has on hand would be fine—and some pumpkin juice, please."

Miranda smiled as she retied her fine hair into a loose ponytail. "Not a problem." She then turned and strode toward the door, but as she was stepping through the doorway she abruptly stopped, turning back to face the younger woman. "Hermione...if you ever need to talk...I mean, I know that you don't know me and I don't know you, but I'd be happy to listen. I'm good at listening, actually."

"Oh—well, thank you," Hermione responded, a bit taken aback by the unexpected gesture, but appreciative nonetheless. "I appreciate the offer, and I'll keep it in mind."

With a final smile and a swish of her ponytail, the medi-witch was gone, leaving Hermione alone with her thoughts. As she sat in the now too-bright room, staring at the chipped pink paint on her toenails—Ginny had insisted on painting them for her weeks ago—she could scarcely believe that it had been merely hours since she and Ron had been rowing in Mr. Filch's storage room—and now they would most likely become parents.

Although she'd experienced immediate elation following Ron's declaration of love, now that she was faced with the truth of her situation and of the very real prospect of so abruptly and

unexpectedly becoming a mother, she didn't know what to think or how to feel.

oOo

Ron stood beneath the showerhead, allowing the hot water to cascade over his skin in a cleansing caress as he relived what had happened between him and Hermione, his emotions more at war than they possibly had ever been in his almost seventeen years.

On the one hand, he was bloody thrilled—and a bit disbelieving, since in a way it felt like it had all been a vivid but surreal dream—about everything that had transpired. He couldn't shake the image, not that he wanted to, of Hermione astride him, her gorgeous tits bouncing while her head tilted back, her face flushed, her hair wild, and her plump lips parted in an expression of ecstasy. *Bloody hell*. Even though he was feeling knackered, spent, and hungry enough to eat the arsehole out of a dead hippogriff, his body couldn't help but respond anew to the all-too-recent memory, but when his hand drifted unthinkingly to his cock, he winced before releasing himself abruptly: His dick bloody hurt.

As he hurriedly scrubbed himself—cleansing charms were all fine and dandy, but there was just something about hot water and soap—his mind lingered on the conversation with the medi-witch, and he experienced a burst of intermingled joy and fear at the idea that he was most likely gonna be a dad—and Hermione the mum of his kid; this had to all be some sorta barmy, wacked-out dream, 'cause there was no bloody way in hell any of this could really be happening to him.

But it *was*. This was all really happening.

Once Ron had stepped out of the shower and used his wand to quickly dry himself, he considered that on the other hand, he was more than a bit worried by Hermione's reaction to the news. Even though she'd seemed happy enough when he'd told her that he loved her—had he actually worked up the bloody nerve to say the words?—and she'd said that she really *had* wanted him to kiss her but couldn't 'cause o'the whole Lavender deal, she hadn't exactly seemed very thrilled by the idea of Ron fathering her kid, had she?

That was the thought that pricked uncomfortably at his mind as he pulled on the fresh tracksuit trousers and t-shirt that his dad had brought over from Hogwarts, and, once he'd stepped out into the cold, sterile-looking hospital room, the one right next to Hermione's, he fought the mad urge to go back to her room just to be near her, but he wasn't *completely* thick: He knew her well enough to sense when she wanted to be alone.

Does she really want to be alone? Or does she just wanna get away from you? Think a smart girl like Hermione wanted to be impregnated against her will by the likes of you?

A lead ball formed in the pit of his stomach at that familiar, doubting voice in the back of his mind, the one that was constantly whispering that he wasn't good enough—and that prior feeling of elation was doused like ice water on a flame.

Well, all right, so she'd said that they'd talk when this was all over, but she hadn't promised him anything, had she; and, okay, she'd said "yes," but since Ron hadn't gotten out clearly what he'd been trying to say, what exactly had she been agreeing to? Being with him? Marrying him? Or simply letting him be in the baby's life? He'd been trying to verbalize all three, but it hadn't escaped his notice that she hadn't said that she loved him, too; in fact, the very moment she realized that stupid potion wasn't affecting her, she'd insisted on calling a Healer.

Ron plopped down on the end of the bed as the lead ball in his stomach ballooned impossibly, threatening to swallow him whole.

In a few hours he'd find out if he was gonna be a father.

In a few hours he'd find out if Hermione would still want anything to do with him when this was all over.

Fuck.

Chapter 13: To Right a Wrong

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Thirteen: To Right a Wrong

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

oOo

She stared at the Healer, watching as her lips moved while gesturing at the clipboard in hand, but the sight and sounds were strangely distorted, garbled, as if Hermione was watching the scene from within the depths of a murky pool; in point of fact, that was quite an accurate analogy, since her throat had closed up, and she was finding it difficult to breathe as she clawed her way to the surface, struggling to no avail with all of her meager strength.

She was drowning, and those at the surface—Ron, Healer Thorson, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley—seemed to be completely oblivious.

The words that had propelled her into this state repeated themselves incessantly in her mind, scraping at the edges of her brain like a desperate, caged animal: *Fertilization successful. Two viable embryos in their very primitive stages. Fraternal twins.*

She was pregnant—or at least she *would* be, once the embryos had successfully implanted themselves in the lining of her uterus.

After making the announcement, Healer Thorson had then rambled on about the minute but real possibility of an ectopic pregnancy—when an embryo implants itself somewhere other than the uterus, in which case it wouldn't survive—but Hermione had barely registered this, as that's when her throat had begun to close up and she'd begun to drown...

"Hermione?"

Quite unexpectedly, her head broke the surface of the inky pool at the sound of Ron's voice saying her name, her surroundings slamming abruptly into sharp focus; colors were somehow more brilliant than before, sounds more distinct. She could hear quite clearly the rapid pounding of her heart in her chest and her own shallow inhales and exhailes, and she saw that four pairs of eyes were fixated on her in obvious concern, but there was only one pair that she saw, only one she *could* see: As he gazed back at her, Ron's eyes were somehow more vividly blue than she could ever recall seeing them, and she could distinguish perfectly every freckle on his familiar face.

"Are you quite all right, dear?" Mrs. Weasley was asking her, anxiousness etched in the elder witch's slightly lined face as her hand pressed against Hermione's forehead; only then did the younger woman's eyes flutter unwillingly away from Ron's to meet his mother's. "You look a bit peaky, and you're a tad warm..."

"I'm fine," she said dismissively, shrugging off Mrs. Weasley's motherly touch as Hermione abruptly lurched to her feet—an action that she immediately regretted, as the room had begun spinning at that exact moment, her equilibrium faltering, and all of a sudden the floor was rushing up at her... *How odd...*

Just as suddenly, she was engulfed in warm, strong arms, and she didn't need to look into his face to know that Ron was the one lowering her gently back to the bed. "Hey, take it easy, sweetheart," he murmured into her ear, the word "sweetheart" ricocheting in her head. It seemed odd that he would call her by a term of endearment since he never had before, but, concurrently, it didn't feel that peculiar at all; quite the contrary, in a way it felt as natural as breathing—and it was a telling indicator that their relationship had shifted and would never be the same again.

"Here you are, dear," Mrs. Weasley said kindly, swiping Hermione's hair out of her eyes as she pressed a glass of water into her hands. Still feeling a bit dizzy, she sat up slightly with Ron's help and took a compliant sip. As she laid back down and stared at the ceiling, all she could think was, *I'm going to be a mother. I'm going to be a mother.*

She wasn't sure how she felt about that knowledge. Hermione had always planned, after all; everything that she did was calculated precisely, leaving no room for mistakes. Her goals/priorities had always been clear, even before she had received that letter from Hogwarts all those years ago, since her hard-working, successful parents had instilled it in her from a young age: Work hard, do some good along the way, and secure a career.

Under less dire circumstances, perhaps ten years or so down the road and when Voldemort was no longer a constant threat (assuming that outcome came to be), Hermione had, naturally, always expected that she would be a wife and a mother, but this was something that she had definitively never imagined for herself at this age—and especially given the state of their world. If this had all been simply a matter of teenage parenthood, she could have made adjustments to her goals and worked even harder to compensate, but, as it happened, the matter *wasn't* that simple: All of their futures were uncertain, and the thought of throwing the lives of two innocent children into the mix... Well, it seemed wrong, unfair.

"She's in a bit of a state of shock, understandably," Healer Thorson was saying to Ron and his parents, and Hermione was drawn out of her thoughts. "She'll be fine, but if you don't mind, I'd like to speak to Hermione alone now."

"Of course," Mr. Weasley responded while Ron, as he had before, hesitated before leaning down to plant a quick kiss to her forehead. As he pulled away, Hermione didn't miss the gobsmacked expression on his face, which indicated that he was partly stunned, partly terrified, and partly giddy with excitement over the news that he was going to be the father of twins.

Again, she felt guilty for her own doubts, and in that moment she was abruptly reminded of why she loved Ron: Though completely infuriating and utterly oblivious at times, he was also loyal to a fault and, despite all of his complaints about hand-me-down robes and whatnot, he loved his family unconditionally—and Hermione now carried a part of Ron inside herself. In his eyes, she was positive, that made *her* tantamount to family.

All at once, it hit her with all the subtlety of a train wreck: There were two small lives, a part of Ron and a part of herself. Living. *Inside* her.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were assuring her that they'd be right outside in the event that she should need them, but she barely registered this as her hands flew to her belly, and all she could think was, *Ron's unborn children*. She was carrying a bit of Ron inside her body, and it was inexplicable, miraculous...

"Hermione, I'd like to discuss your options with you," the Healer said gently as she sat down in the chair so recently vacated by Mrs. Weasley.

"My options," Hermione repeated, frowning as she sat up once more; the wave of vertigo had

passed.

"Yes, I've reviewed your records sent over by your Head of House, so I'm fully aware that you're a bright young witch with an endless amount of potential—and an unplanned pregnancy was undoubtedly the very last thing you expected."

Hermione's stomach twisted unpleasantly at the clear direction this discussion was going, despite her own earlier thoughts about it being wrong to bring a child into this uncertain world. "I won't do it," she found herself saying, the words slipping from her lips before she'd even made any sort of conscious decision. "An—an abortion." It felt like a dirty word, more horrible even than *Mudblood*. "I can't. I won't."

While this decision, admittedly, had partly to do with Ron—she knew that he would likely never forgive her if she aborted their babies—it had mostly to do with the fact that her unborn children had no voice with which to tell her that they deserved a chance at life: Had Hermione not always stood up for those with no voice? Those who either would not or could not speak for themselves? Had she not always stood steadfast in her belief that all beings, magical or otherwise, were deserving of an opportunity? Therefore, how could she possibly consider terminating her own flesh-and-blood children before they'd even had a chance to live? Now more than ever, it was paramount that she stand by her convictions.

Of course, on a certain level she was completely aware that her line of reasoning wasn't born entirely out of selflessness, as she knew now that, quite simply, she *couldn't* abort her children with Ron—even if from a logical standpoint it might actually be for the best for everyone involved.

Nevertheless, she vowed to herself right then that she would protect her babies. If, by chance, Voldemort indeed rose to power...well, she would hide them for their safety. Since Hermione was a Muggle-born and a known friend of Harry Potter's, she was intelligent enough to realize that that association would endanger not only her children but her parents as well, and so she would...she would alter her parents' memories and send them away to raise her babies as their own. It would be a complicated bit of magic, but she was competent in her magical abilities, should the need arise.

With that hastily conceived plan in mind, and armed with the courage of her convictions, Hermione met Healer Thorson's eyes, silently daring the elder witch to challenge her. However, the Healer didn't seem inclined to do any such thing; instead, she merely smiled and marked something on her clipboard. "Very well. I always encourage the possibility of adoption before abortion, at any rate, so did you wish to discuss that option? There are many couples, magical and Muggle alike, hoping—"

"No, thank you," Hermione said quickly. If she ended up having to give up her children out of necessity, it wouldn't be to anonymous strangers.

Once again, Healer Thorson didn't attempt to talk her out of her decision. "Very well," she repeated. "In that case, I see no reason to keep you here. You've been prescribed potions for muscle soreness and to help you sleep—and I'm going to write you up one for morning sickness as well, since you'll need it, and another for anxiety." With a wave of her wand, a piece of parchment appeared in her hand, which she then gave to Hermione. "Just show that to Madam Pomfrey, and she'll give you what you need."

She then paused, glancing at her clipboard. "Your babies are due on or around November 21," she finally said, looking back up. "You'll want to start thinking about choosing a Birth Healer. If Madam Pomfrey is willing, she may, of course, perform your check-ups while you're in school, but obviously you'll need pre-natal care during the summer as well, so here's a list of Birth Healers

accepting new patients—and a list of programs designed to assist teenage mothers."

Another piece of parchment was pressed into Hermione's hands. "Now, I'm aware that you're a Sixth Year, so it should interest you to know that I've discussed your situation with Professor McGonagall, and she assures me that since this circumstance was out of your control that special arrangements will be made so that both you and Mr. Weasley can complete your educations."

Hermione nodded in understanding, unexpected tears of gratitude stinging her eyes at this information. She wasn't certain what she'd thought would result, but, although she knew it was silly, a part of her had half-expected to be punished—to be told that her magical education had come to an abrupt end. "That—that's wonderful news."

Healer Thorson smiled again. "Do you have any questions for me, Hermione? Any concerns at all?"

"Oh—um—when will I know...what I'm having? The babies' gender, I mean?"

"Not big on surprises, then?"

"I prefer to be prepared," Hermione replied with a nervous laugh, pushing her hair behind her ears.

"Of course; you strike me as that type. Madam Pomfrey will be able to perform a test in a few days, when she checks you to ensure that implantation has successfully occurred; she can tell you the genders then as well."

Hermione nodded, subconsciously biting her lip as she took that in.

"Is there anything else you can think of?"

"Not at the moment, no."

"In that case, you're free to go. You may use my office to Floo back to Hogwarts, if you'd like. Just remember to eat right and exercise, but nothing too strenuous, and keep in mind that it's normal to actually *lose* weight during the first trimester due to morning sickness—but if you don't start gaining by your second, that'll be something to discuss with your Birth Healer. Well, I wish you the best of luck, Hermione. Don't forget to check in with Madam Pomfrey when you get back to the castle."

oOo

Practically the instant Ron stepped out of Hermione's hospital room, he was tackled; he let out an "oomph" as the wind was knocked out of him, and he staggered beneath his mum's grip as she clung to him and sobbed against his chest—but whether they were tears of joy or sorrow, he had no sodding clue.

"Mum?" he said awkwardly, patting the top of his mother's head, unsure of what to say or do.

"My b-baby b-boy," she seemed to be sobbing, her tears soaking his chest through the fabric of his jumper. "Going to be a f-father..."

"There, there, Molly," his dad intervened, gently prying her from Ron's torso and guiding her to the opposite wall so that they were out of the doorway. "We have to be the strong ones, remember? For the kids."

"I'm sorry, Arthur," she said as she straightened, wiping her eyes on a handkerchief and clearly

attempting to regain her composure. "Oh, Ronnie, I just love you and Hermione both so much, and I'm so sorry about this situation, but I'm just happy that the poor dear is safe and healthy now and...and she's going to be the mother of my first grandchildren...can hardly believe it..."

As his mother continued to babble, clearly overwhelmed with emotions—both good and bad—Ron pretended to listen to her but was actually thinking about everything he'd just learned.

He was gonna be a father. Of *twins*.

Bloody. Fucking. Hell.

Although he'd known it was a strong possibility, having it all confirmed by the Healer was just...sodding *mental*. He was bloody thrilled—but he was fucking scared shitless at the same time, and then there was Hermione...

What the blazes was going on with Hermione? He had no clue what was going on in her head, but all he knew was that he needed to prove to her that he was serious about this whole thing—serious about *her*.

Before he even realized what he was doing, he began backing down the corridor, away from his mum and dad, who were talking about Ron's situation like he wasn't right bloody there.

"Son, where are you going?" his dad asked suddenly, his eyes snapping in his direction.

"To right a wrong," he said simply, and then he turned and broke into a jog as he dashed toward Healer Thorson's office.

He was gonna break up with Lavender, and he was gonna do it right now.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not condemning anyone who's had an abortion, as I believe that we all do what we feel is best based on our individual circumstances, and by no means did I intend to offend anyone with Hermione's personal decision, which is just that—her personal decision, and the choice to terminate a pregnancy/not terminate a pregnancy IS a very personal one, often based on emotions rather than politics or rationale. (She admitted to herself that it wasn't the most logical decision.) Nor are her thoughts on the matter necessarily reflective of my own, as I merely chose to portray her in a manner that I personally felt to be befitting to her character: While I realize that not everyone will agree, I firmly believe that the champion of house-elves, centaurs, and the like would also be the champion of her unborn child/children with Ron.

Furthermore, Hermione's thoughts in this chapter reflect this specific set of circumstances (I.E. the fact that she's carrying RON'S unborn children). If you recall, up until the point where she abruptly remembered that it was a bit of Ron that she carried & began trying to rationalize the decision to keep the babies, she was leaning in the OPPOSITE direction with her thoughts of it being "wrong" to bring children into their uncertain world - so I can't say in all certainty that it wouldn't have gone differently had she been carrying anyone other than Ron's child/children, but that's a rather moot point anyway since that's an unlikely scenario.

Chapter 14: Faith Versus Logic

Chapter Fourteen: Faith Versus Logic

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

oOo

When he stepped out the door of McGonagall's quiet office, it was to find that the castle's corridors were mostly deserted, with bright sunlight slanting in through the high windows and bathing the ancient stone in a midmorning glow. Until that moment Ron had had no clue what time it was, but now he guessed that it was first period, based on the fact that if it was still breakfast time then there would be more students and staff lingering in the passageways.

He deliberated as he pulled the door closed behind him, unsure of where to go: He knew that Hermione had Runes first thing, but he realized that he had no sodding idea about Lavender's first lesson of the day. He frowned at that thought as images from the past couple of months abruptly invaded his mind: images of himself with his hands all over Lavender as she straddled him in the common room, their tongues down each others' throats. He thought about how even before she'd begun to annoy him and their "relationship" had taken a rather one-sided turn, they hadn't had too many conversations, had they?

In hindsight, he felt embarrassed by his behavior, and more than a bit ashamed—especially in light of all that had happened in just the past several hours between him and Hermione. When he'd been with Lav he'd told himself that it had all been in good fun, and she'd certainly seemed to enjoy herself, hadn't she, so where was the harm? But he reckoned he'd known all along that he was using her to make himself feel better when she seemed to really bloody fancy him, and that thought, along with how obvious it had been that he was hurting Hermione, made his gut churn with guilt.

And then there was that whole bloody mess where Hermione had walked in on Lavender polishing his knob, and he'd felt too stinking guilty to chuck the daft bird after that. He really *had* made a right mess of things 'cause of his hormones and his stupidity, hadn't he? Well, now was his chance to fix it, even if he had to endure Lavender's tears and her raging at him; he reckoned it was a small price to pay to be free of her so he could be with Hermione.

Even as his pulse sped up in dread at the thought of her reaction, he swallowed his fears—nothing Lavender could do to him could possibly be worse than Hermione's birds or being pummeled by her sharp little fists—as his legs carried him to the Transfiguration classroom with renewed determination. After rapping the door twice, he pushed it open, his eyes scanning the familiar room and taking in a group of fifth year Slytherins and Hufflepuffs; the Slytherins began whispering excitedly with one another at Ron's appearance, but he ignored them as McGonagall, having spotted him, excused herself and slipped out into the corridor.

"Weasley," she greeted him, a concerned look in his Head of House's formidable eyes as she gazed up at him. "Is everything quite all right?"

"Oh—er—yeah, I'm all right, and Hermione's good—I actually think they're gonna release her soon." His ears went abruptly hot as he remembered with extreme mortification that McGonagall knew what he and Hermione had had to do to make her better. Bloody hell, she might even already know that Hermione was pregnant by him.

"So I was informed by Healer Thorson," McGonagall replied neutrally, with an underlying note of sympathy.

"Right," Ron said awkwardly, his embarrassment blossoming a hundredfold at the confirmation that she was indeed being updated by the hospital. "Well, anyway, I was just wondering if you knew—I mean, of course you *know*, but I was looking for—"

"Miss Brown is currently in Divination with Professor Trelawney," the elder witch said knowingly. "Mr. Weasley...on another matter, it should interest you to know that we interviewed Mr. Filch earlier this morning concerning how he came to acquire the potion involved in Hermione's accident; it turns out that he confiscated it from a student, mistakenly believing it to be one of your brothers' love potions."

"Student? What student?"

"That, I'm afraid, is confidential for the time being, whilst the investigation is ongoing. Rest assured, however, that a thorough inquiry is being made into how the student in question managed to acquire such a dangerous, illegal substance. Additionally, Mr. Filch is being penalized for allowing students to handle unknown and potentially dangerous artifacts unsupervised."

Ron's thoughts turned dark at that first tidbit, and he had an inkling of what Harry would say: that the student who snuck the potion into the castle was none other than Draco Malfoy, and that he'd gotten it from dear ol' Daddy—and Ron reckoned it wouldn't be such a stretch of the imagination, given the elder Malfoy's history. After all, that sonuvabitch had slipped Tom Riddle's diary into Ginny's cauldron her first year, hadn't he? Not to mention all that went down at the Ministry just last year, which had resulted in the bastard's arrest. The idea of him having a Medieval potion designed to make some poor witch his sex slave lying around his house seemed right up his alley, didn't it?

Or not, another voice piped up in the back of his mind—a voice that always sounded suspiciously like Hermione's. *It seems to me that Lucius Malfoy would be disgusted by the idea of touching a Muggle-born witch in such a manner—and much more so by the thought of actually breeding with one.*

Yeah, but it'd be a good way for Draco to get revenge, wouldn't it? he argued with "Hermione." *The git blames us for his father getting arrested, doesn't he? Maybe he'd think that sneaking you that potion would be a clever way to get even.*

"Bloody hell," he muttered under his breath as he rubbed his temples, which had begun to throb. He was spending way too much time around Harry if he was starting to suspect Malfoy every sodding time something went down. *Oh, look—it's bloody raining. Must be Malfoy's fault.*

"Mr. Weasley—Ronald..."

His head snapped up, his attention caught: To his memory, McGonagall had never called him by his first name before.

"I've already extended my deepest regrets to your parents concerning this...most unfortunate happenstance, but I feel that I, as a representative of Hogwarts School in Professor Dumbledore's absence, owe you and Hermione both my sincerest apologies." She paused momentarily, as if picking her next words carefully. "It is my duty as your teacher and, most importantly, your Head of House to protect you whilst you are in my charge, and I failed you in that regard."

As she spoke, Ron felt more awkward than ever. The idea of stern Professor McGonagall actually *apologizing* to him seemed...bizarre, to say the least. Bloody hell, what was he supposed

to say to that? "It—it's not your fault, Professor," he finally said, grasping at straws, not sure if it was the right thing to say or not. "'Sides, it'll be fine. I mean, yeah, so it's not exactly what we'd planned for—at least, not right *now*, anyway, but...what's done is done, isn't it? Hermione's a smart one—but I don't gotta tell *you* that, do I?—so she'll manage brilliantly, and as for me, well, I'll do what I've gotta do, won't I? I—I'll get a job or something to support...them."

His face burned impossibly hot, his stomach doing that odd little flippie thing as he realized that he'd almost said "my family." Was that what Hermione was now?—He *really* wanted her to be, but he wasn't so sure that she'd allow that label. Even if she wanted Ron to be her family, maybe she thought the idea of a man supporting a woman was...barbaric or something. At that train of thought, all the old insecurities and doubts threatened to resurface, but he shoved them aside with a force of will; he had to focus on one thing at a time, and step one was breaking up with Lavender.

"I have no doubt in my mind that you will do the right thing, Mr. Weasley." McGonagall was smiling at him in an oddly...affectionate?...manner. "However, you will not be required to seek employment presently because, as I've already informed your parents, you have my assurances that your education will continue uninterrupted, as special allowances will be made to accommodate your situation."

Ron rubbed the back of his neck absently with one hand, studiously refusing to meet McGonagall's eyes. While he was appreciative of what she was offering, he was really just ready for this whole friggin' discussion to come to an end; he'd take facing Lavender right about now to the awkwardness of continuing this conversation with his Head of House. "Right, well, thanks—Hermione'll be happy about that—I mean, not that *I'm* not, too, but...y'know how she is about learning and all..." He shut his mouth abruptly as he realized that he was rambling and McGonagall was watching him with an amused expression on her lined face. "Right, then, I'll just..." He gestured vaguely in the direction of the Divination classroom.

"You do that, Mr. Weasley—oh, and do use some tact when you break up with Miss Brown, won't you? As it is, it will be on my shoulders to listen to her blathering and to soothe her broken heart in the aftermath, so I implore you to make it as painless as possible for everyone."

Ron stared at her, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. "Er—yeah, all right. Sure."

She smiled again. "Excellent. In that case, take today to get your affairs in order, and I expect you and Miss Granger both back in class tomorrow morning, well-rested and ready to resume your studies and prefect duties. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a class to teach. Oh, and, Weasley—"

He paused in mid-turn, his head snapping back in her direction.

"Potter is looking for you. It didn't escape his notice that you and Miss Granger were both missing this morning."

oOo

"Hermione, are you all right, dear?" Molly Weasley asked anxiously from outside the closed bathroom door, Hermione's packed rucksack tucked under her arm. The poor girl had gone in there to get dressed to go back to Hogwarts, but a good fifteen minutes had passed, and she had yet to emerge. "Do you need me to come in?"

"Oh—er—no, thank you, Mrs. Weasley," her muffled voice came from the other side of the door, and Molly heard unmistakable tears in the girl's voice, try as she might to hide them. Even though the older woman had but one daughter, she had learned to pick up on these things by instinct; as tough as Ginny acted, Molly could always detect her vulnerability—and while Hermione was

different from Ginny in many ways, they were similar in several other aspects. "Just give me one moment, please."

"Take your time, dear."

After another minute or so had passed, the door finally opened and Hermione stepped out, looking much the same as Molly was accustomed to seeing her, only slightly paler and with red-rimmed eyes: She was dressed in jeans and a jumper, her lovely face scrubbed clean and make-up-less, her wild hair tamed in a plait down her back, and she was entirely too thin, in Molly's opinion. She repressed her frown of disapproval, thinking that now that she was expecting, Hermione would have to devote a bit more time to taking care of herself, even if that meant cutting back on her studies.

"Care to talk about it?" Molly asked her kindly, stepping forward and affectionately tucking a wayward curl behind the young woman's ear. She really was a lovely girl, Molly mused, both in spirit and in looks, adding to herself that even though she would *never* have wished this hardship on her beloved son or this darling girl, if she had to choose the mother of her youngest son's children—Hermione Granger would be it.

The young witch bit her lip, seeming to hesitate.

"You know you can talk to me about anything, love."

"Am—am I making the right choice?" she finally said, a tremor in her voice as she met Molly's eyes. "About...the babies. What if...what if You-Know-Who...?"

Molly smiled tenderly at the girl that her son had been in love with for years, considering her response before replying, "I think that going with your heart is always the right decision. Making choices based on 'what-ifs' can only lead to heartache."

"Even if what my heart wants isn't necessarily the most logical choice?"

"What the heart wants rarely *is* the logical choice," Molly replied with a laugh. "If I'd made the logical choice about whom to marry, I would likely be sitting in Trevor Dawson's mansion right now; true, I would have all of my wants and needs met, but I wouldn't have seven children that I would happily die for and a husband who adores me—which is all that I *really* want or need."

Her smile faltered when she thought of Percy, but thankfully Hermione didn't seem to notice as she grinned in return—and it reached her eyes. "I'm scared," she finally admitted in a whisper, the smile fading from her face.

"And I think that you would be rather foolish not to be," Molly said gently. "I can't promise what the outcome of this war will be, Hermione, or that the choice you're making will be an *easy* one—in fact, I can tell you from first-hand experience that it's *not*," she added, remembering how the magical world had also been on the cusp of war when she'd unexpectedly fallen pregnant with Bill, "but I think that sometimes we just have to have a little bit of faith that everything will work out for the best, even if it defies logic. Do you know what I mean, dear?"

"No," Hermione said with a laugh, "but I think that I believe you, all the same."

"Well, that's good, then," Molly responded, chuckling in return. "You're a lovely, brilliant girl, Hermione, and I believe that you'll do just fine. And Ron...you know that he loves you, right? I know that he hasn't always been very...smart in his decision-making," she added with a disapproving frown, remembering the letter she'd received from Minerva at the start of term regarding her son's illicit activities with a girl named Lavender Brown. "But I know my boy, and I

know that he's head-over-heels in love with you, even if it's taken him a while to recognize or acknowledge it."

At the mention of Ron, Hermione's head had snapped up as if she'd been given a jolt, her eyes widening somewhat in her pale face. "I know that," she said, her cheeks tinged with pink as she took a deep breath and said, "and I love him as well. Truly, I do."

Molly smiled again, feeling pleased at this confirmation. "You don't have to assure me of that, dear. I think Ron's the one you need to tell."

"I was planning to," the younger witch said quickly. "I mean, I was going to before... Wait, speaking of Ron, where is he?"

oOo

Ron paced back and forth beneath the trapdoor leading up to Trelawney's classroom atop the North Tower, simultaneously fretting over the impending conversation with Lavender and feeling exhilarated that he was finally going to do it.

After glancing at his bare wrist for the umpteenth time—why the hell didn't he own a watch, anyway?—the trapdoor finally opened, the familiar silvery ladder descending; Ron distributed his weight alternately between his legs, impatiently nodding to his classmates that greeted him as he waited for his soon-to-be ex-girlfriend.

Parvati clamored down ahead of her best friend; upon laying eyes on him, she merely rolled her eyes and called out, "Lav, it's back," before glaring at him pointedly and stalking away, her arms crossed stiffly over her chest.

"What?" Lavender called down in response, and then Ron caught sight of her familiar, shapely legs as she too descended the ladder—and he was pleased that the sight did absolutely nothing for him. (His head was still way too full of images of Hermione's beautiful body, his nostrils still too full of her intoxicating scent.) "What's ba—oh," she said as she landed on the stone next to him, her eyes meeting his. "Won-Won!" she screeched in that annoying way she had, clear relief in her voice as she launched herself at him in a blonde flash, her arms seizing him in a strangling grip—bloody hell, she was stronger than she looked—and her lips attached themselves to his before he could stop her.

"Lav—," he gasped in protest, a bit slow to recover from a moment of surprise; he pulled back forcibly, but her lips followed his, latching back onto him as her fists gripped in his jumper with a renewed vigor. "Wait—*Lavender*," he said as he turned his head aside, his hands coming up to grip her shoulders, physically forcing her an arm's length away.

"What is it?" she asked, her blue eyes widening in surprise over the rejection. "They healed you, right? I mean, they wouldn't've let you go if you were still affected—"

"Lav, I can't do this anymore," he blurted, eager to just get it over with, like ripping off a Band-Aid, as the Muggle expression his dad was fond of saying went—although he had no sodding clue what a Band-Aid was.

So much for tact.

"What? You can't do *what* anymore, Won-Won?"

Uh-oh, Ron thought when her hands came up to land on her too-narrow hips, her eyes narrowing dangerously—although, he conceded, she wasn't *nearly* as scary as Hermione could be.

"This." He gestured between them. "I can't do *us* anymore. And don't call me that—Merlin's bollocks, my name is Ron." He wasn't trying to be mean, but he really hated that stupid nickname and would rather be bludgeoned to death by a pack of angry Beaters than hear it again.

She looked genuinely taken aback, hurt and shock flashing across her face. "You—you can't be serious."

"Lavender," he sighed, closing his eyes briefly. *Be nice*, he instructed himself. *You're bloody dumping her; you could at least be nice about it.* "This can't possibly be that big of a surprise, can it? I mean, we've never even had a real conversation. I've no bloody clue what you're even into, and I'd bet ya ten Galleons you couldn't even tell me the name of my favorite Quidditch team."

There was a moment of lingering silence while she stared at him, her blue eyes flashing as the hurt was abruptly replaced by obvious rage. Behind them, Ron was aware that they had an audience as Trelawney's next class had already begun forming a queue, every set of eyes locked on the feuding couple.

He was just about to suggest that they go somewhere they could talk in private, but before he could do so, Lavender hissed, "Conversation?" A derisive laugh worthy of Hermione escaped her lips then. "*Conversation?* You weren't too bloody keen on *conversation* when we were getting each other off, were you, *Ron?*" She placed exaggerated emphasis on his name, and several students sniggered, which had Ron's face heating up in embarrassment. "Or how about when I sucked you off in that classroom? I don't recall you putting up much of a bloody effort to stop me so we could talk about your *favorite bloody Quidditch team*, or so that you could ask me something about myself!"

Ron winced at her words, ignoring the jeers and laughter from their considerable audience, at his actions being thrown so bluntly into his face like that—and that deep feeling of shame washed over him at the reminder of his behavior. "Lavender, I'm sorry, okay? I...I should've bloody stopped you, all right?"

"So it's my fault, then?" she scoffed. "I coerced you into doing something you didn't really want to do, is that it? What a load of bollocks."

"What? No, I'm not saying I didn't—of course I—oh, bloody hell." He scrubbed his face with both hands, feeling frustrated on top of everything else. "I just meant that I should've...set limits or something 'cause..." *'Cause I don't care about you. Not like that, anyway.* How the bloody fucking hell was he supposed to tell her that, especially in front of all these people? Without making her feel terrible and making himself look like a bloody heartless wanker? "Lavender, let's go somewhere to talk—"

"Why? *I* don't have anything to hide. I'm perfectly fine where I am, thank you very much." She crossed her arms stubbornly, and there were more snickers and jeers all around.

"Fine," he growled through gritted teeth, just wanting this whole bloody thing to come to an end. He was eager to get back to Hermione, to talk to her, to make sure she was okay.

"It's that Hermione Granger, isn't it?" Lavender said suddenly, and Ron's hands slowly slid from his face as he stared back at her. "*It is*, isn't it? I can see it in your face. I can't believe it; she never struck me as a boyfriend-stealing slag, but—"

"Don't you dare say a word about her," he said lowly. He felt bad for how he'd treated Lavender, but Hermione didn't deserve abuse, and he wouldn't tolerate it. "She didn't do a damn thing."

Lavender seemed to be chewing the inside of her lip as she regarded him thoughtfully. "Fine," she

finally said as she stepped forward, and Ron thought she was gonna hit him—and he had every intention of letting her, 'cause he knew he deserved it. "Fair enough," she added as she stopped mere inches in front of him, but instead of slapping him as he'd predicted, she said, just low enough so that he alone could hear, "You said you don't know anything about me? Well, here's something for starters: I was raised by my mother because my father died when I was four. I have a little Squib half-brother that I adore, and when I was little my ambition was to become the first Wizarding princess. I always thought that you were funny and sorta cute, and this year I thought, 'Why not go for it?' Parvati told me she didn't think you were right for me, and I should've listened."

She paused, allowing her words to sink in before adding, "I know that you support the Chudley Cannons, even though I don't know why. I know you're brilliant at chess, because I've watched you play for years. And I know that you're a good Keeper when your head's in the game. And...I always thought that you only hung out around Hermione because you're both friends with Harry, and that she helped you with your homework. Clearly, I was wrong about that."

Lavender then picked up her book bag off of the floor and swung it over her shoulder, obviously trying to maintain her dignity. Straightening her skirt with precise movements, she looked up at him one more time and said, "Looks like you owe me ten Galleons," before turning around and striding in the other direction with her chin held high, their group of onlookers parting before her.

Ron stared after her, ignoring the whispers from the throng, feeling a bit floored and almost just as shitty as he'd felt after Hermione had caught him and Lavender together in that classroom.

Fucking hell.

oOo

Hermione hurried to the top of the North Tower, feeling a bit winded, yet determined to find Ron—to tell him, once and for all, that she loved him. Although she wasn't certain about anything else in this life, and she was still a bit sore about everything he'd put her through with Lavender, she remained resolute in her love for him, especially in light of everything that had recently happened between them—and she didn't desire for him to retain any doubts regarding her true feelings any longer. She was determined that everything finally be out in the open.

As she climbed the spiraling staircase, she considered what Mrs. Weasley had said about him wanting to "right a wrong" and knew that he'd most likely gone to break up with Lavender. While Hermione certainly had no desire to stop him from doing *that*, she came up with an admittedly hasty plan to keep out of sight and wait for him to do what he had to do—and then she would tell him, before he had more time to let everything that she hadn't said fester in his head.

Her pulse raced in nervous anticipation as she heard the telling clatter of feet-on-stone and knew that class must have just let out. Moments later, her classmates were pouring down the stairs; a few greeted her and expressed their happiness that she seemed to be in good health, and a few others whispered amongst themselves: It had clearly gotten out that she'd been hospitalized in St. Mungo's, and she could only imagine what the rumor mill was churning.

As she neared the top, she passed Parvati, who seemed surprised to see her, the other girl's eyes widening slightly before she forced a smile, and Hermione faked one in return for Lavender's best friend. Although they'd been friendly over the years, Hermione couldn't ignore the fact that Parvati had joined in with Lavender to whisper behind her back and tease her.

Those thoughts were whisked from her mind in the next instant, however, when she reached the top of the stairs and was greeted by a sight she'd never expected—a sight that made her stomach churn with an intense bout of nausea: Ron was standing just under the trapdoor that lead up to

Professor Trelawney's classroom, and Lavender was wrapped around him, their bodies and faces joined in an embrace.

Chapter 15: Mother Dearest

Chapter Fifteen: Mother Dearest

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

oOo

She let herself into the modern, three-story brick home, courtesy of the old ceramic garden gnome that housed the spare key. Of course, Hermione supposed that she could have simply Alohomora'ed her way inside, but the convenience wasn't worth the risk of being seen by a neighbor who might happen to be peering out at her from a nearby window; one could never be too cautious in the Muggle world, after all.

As it was, after she'd requested a few days' leave of absence on the pretense of informing her parents of her pregnancy, Professor McGonagall had had to escort her off of school grounds and then by means of Side-Along Apparition (Hermione hadn't yet taken her Apparition test) to the Ministry-approved checkpoint closest to her house—which happened to be between two dumpsters on the corner of Nightingale Lane, three blocks over from her family home.

As Hermione stepped into the familiar grand foyer and hung up her coat in the nearby closet, Professor McGonagall had only just bade her good luck and assured her that her family's home would be connected to the Floo Network on Sunday night at precisely seven o'clock. Now she was left alone, shivering in this empty, pristine house that her parents had worked so hard to attain on this chilly, overcast day in late February.

For as long as she could remember, a cleaning crew arrived every Monday and Friday morning at eight o'clock, like clockwork, to dust her parents' trinkets and knickknacks acquired throughout the years on various holidays, to wash the linens, vacuum the carpet, polish the wood, and scrub the toilets and bathtubs, and they always cleared out by 3PM.

As it was nearing noon on a Thursday, Hermione was confident that she was quite alone in this big, immaculate house, and that suited her just fine, as she hadn't yet figured out how she was going to break the news to her parents that their sole, level-headed, practical albeit strange daughter was pregnant (or would be in a couple of days, at least) by the very boy that they'd often allowed her to visit over various holidays throughout the course of the last several years. While that arrangement had had to do in part with the fact that she had never given her parents a reason not to trust her, it also had much to do with the fact that her father and Ron's father got on so well; actually, Mr. Weasley had taken to inviting Hugo Granger to the Leaky Cauldron for a pint three or four times a year, and her father always raved about what a jolly good bloke Mr. Weasley was after these little get-togethers.

She fervently hoped that her news wouldn't ruin this cross-cultural acquaintanceship. She further hoped that her news wouldn't completely shatter her parents' trust in her—although it was a safe wager that they wouldn't trust her (or Ron) enough to send her on anymore overnight holidays to the Burrow. Not that they had much of a say, she reminded herself, seeing as she was an adult in the magical community and would soon be the mother of twins.

Certainly, however, that didn't change the fact that she loved and respected her parents and didn't wish to disappoint them, especially not after she'd worked so hard over the years to gain the respect of her teachers and peers in spite of the perceived set-back of her status as a Muggle-born

—in point of fact, she'd worked *extra* hard in order to eradicate the absurd notion that a Muggle-born couldn't be as "good" of a witch or wizard as a pureblood or half-blood—and to retain her parents' approval despite her knowing that they viewed her magical schooling as a strange eccentricity. Though they never said so, and they were actually quite fascinated by the magical world if slightly fearful of it—Hermione had said very little to her parents about Voldemort out of fear that they would insist that she leave the Wizarding world altogether—it was blatantly evident that Mum and Dad would prefer that she choose to attend a Muggle university in preparation of becoming a lawyer or a doctor rather than to pursue a career in the magical community.

As Hermione's rambling thoughts drifted once more to Ron and the Burrow, the place that she had come to think of as a second home, she was jolted out of her daze. Dropping her bag by her feet, she quickly punched the code into the alarm before forcing her legs to carry her to her mother's gourmet kitchen to put on the kettle with trembling fingers, willing herself not to become sick once more with grief.

As she waited rather impatiently for the tea—again, she supposed she could've done it by magic, but there was something about being in her childhood home that had her reverting back to the Muggle way of doing things even though she was of age—she drummed her fingers on the granite countertop, trying but failing miserably to get the image of Lavender wrapped around Ron out of her head.

She had only been witness to the scene for a moment or two before the nausea had overwhelmed her and she'd been forced to make a mad dash for the toilet, but it had been enough. She hadn't wanted to see any more than that. If she had...well, she might have reacted far worse than the time she'd caught them previously...and then McGonagall would have been forced to expel her, and that simply would not do.

Hermione had therefore made the decision to request to leave, if only through the weekend so that she could get her head on straight and refrain from doing anything rash. Before leaving school, she had calmly collected her assignments from her professors, and she took pride in the fact that she hadn't shed a single tear. She hadn't told anyone save Professor McGonagall where she was going, not even Harry; she hadn't been able to face her best friend because there would be awkward questions that she wasn't yet ready to answer. Furthermore, she feared that she wouldn't have been able to hide the strongest of her emotions from him: her humiliation, rage, regret, grief.

She felt as if happiness had been a rug beneath her feet, and it had been snatched out from under her so abruptly that she'd fallen and landed on her arse—hard.

I will not start crying. I will not start crying, she chanted to herself as a sob worked its way into a painful lump in her throat. If she started crying, she would likely never be able to stop—and she'd spent the past several months shedding far too many tears for Ron Weasley, who apparently had no true feelings for her, despite his pretty words. Apparently he hadn't meant anything that he'd spoken in that hospital room, and his mother didn't know him as well as she liked to believe.

She supposed that people said and did barmy things in the heat of the moment; what a clever, convincing, cruel actor he'd turned out to be, and when he'd said that he wanted to right a wrong, apparently he'd meant that he wanted to ditch her, Hermione, to be with that...that moronic *tart*.

However, despite it all, despite her dark thoughts and what she'd witnessed with her own eyes not more than a couple of hours ago, it somehow didn't *feel* right, did it? There was something about the entire incident that didn't ring true, yet she couldn't deny what her senses had told her, could she? After all, she knew what she saw; there was no deceiving her own eyes, so what other rational explanation could there possibly be? Had Lavender fed him one of Fred and George's love potions, perhaps? Had he been whacked over the top of his head? Hexed stupid?

Before she could ponder the matter any further, the high-pitched whistle indicating that the tea was ready startled her out of her thoughts. She removed the kettle from the stovetop and poured herself a cup of the steaming Earl Grey—a difficult task when her hands didn't want to stop trembling—before digging into the pockets of her school robes for the Calming Draught that Madam Pomfrey had given her and adding a healthy dash to her tea.

She took several cautious sips as she wandered back out into the foyer and up the staircase, heading to her bedroom on the third floor. Slipping inside and shutting the door, Hermione placed the teacup on a nearby shelf before stripping down to her knickers and bra; she then crossed the room to her antique bureau and dug out a set of flannel pajamas: Though she hadn't been home since Christmas, the soft fabric smelled fresh, like it had recently been laundered; likewise, when she ran a finger over the polished wood of the dresser, there was no streak left on the surface or dust residue on her fingertip. It was as if her parents were preparing for a moment like this—when Hermione might show up unexpectedly from school.

Once changed, she drifted to her bookshelf, considering reading for a bit to help take her mind off of things as she waited for the Calming Draught to take effect. Her eyes scanned the familiar, organized volumes that were crammed neatly onto the shelves: her old spell books, books on science and the arts, Shakespeare, Keats, Tolstoy, Hemingway, Dante, *The Iliad*, *Little Women*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Awakening*, some Anne Rice, and several drugstore romance novels "borrowed" from Mum and never returned. (She justified the latter by telling herself that a bit of variety helped expand her horizons.)

Anything remotely romantic is definitely out of the question, she thought sourly as she reached for *Fertility and Conception*, thinking that she'd like more insight into what was happening to her body.

From this point on, that was what she intended to concentrate on: the two tiny embryos that contained the DNA required to evolve into two very real, fully-fledged human beings over the course of the next several months. She had no idea if Ron wanted anything to do with her or their unborn children; if someone had questioned her about his intentions not hours ago, she would have responded with absolute certainty, but now she was left with nothing but confusion and humiliation—but her personal feelings were inconsequential: All that mattered was keeping them safe, healthy, and happy, even if that meant eventually having to relocate in order to achieve those goals.

Flopping down on her immaculately-made, cream-and-lavender duvet (Hermione was seriously considering getting one with a different color scheme), she clutched the book to her chest and stared at her familiar bedroom—which hadn't actually changed all that much from the time she was a child: The walls were still the same cream color that her cousin, Caitlyn, had deemed "boring" and attempted to convince Hermione to paint them a shocking fuchsia; the framed Monet prints still adorned her walls; there were several sterling silver picture frames scattered about that housed photographs of herself and her parents on camping and skiing holidays over the years; her porcelain dolls were still lined up on a high shelf, untouched for years.

The rarely-used TV-and-VCR combo was perched on top of the chest-of-drawers; an outdated computer and a globe took up much of the space on her desk; and on her bureau was the jewelry box that Nana had given her, a CD player/FM radio—a mix CD featuring some of her favorite composers was still nestled inside it—and a framed picture of herself, Harry, and Ron, taken by Colin Creevey their second year at Hogwarts: They were merely three smiling and waving children. Funny how much things had changed since then.

Although that year definitely hadn't been easy, what with the Chamber of Secrets having been opened and Hagrid being blamed for it, Ginny having been possessed by Tom Riddle's diary and

nearly dying as a result, and Hermione herself having first been turned into a cat and having subsequently been petrified by the Basilisk, it still, in spite of it all, had somehow seemed much simpler back then.

Hermione closed her eyes; the Calming Draught was taking effect, soothing her nerves and making her sleepy.

She saw Ron's blue eyes. She saw his full lips.

She remembered the way he'd felt, moving inside her body, his silky skin sliding against hers, his large hands on her breasts and hips.

'Ermione, love you so fucking much.

Her eyes flew open, and she bit her lip against the ache in her heart and the coinciding ache between her legs, the tears finally rising in her eyes as she rolled onto her side and stared at the picture on her bureau, focusing on second-year-Ron's smiling face. Quite abruptly, she recalled the conversation that she'd had with Mrs. Weasley not hours ago: *I think that sometimes we just have to have a little bit of faith that everything will work out for the best, even if it defies logic...*

...but I know my boy, and I know that he's head-over-heels in love with you, even if it's taken him a while to recognize or acknowledge it.

Again, Hermione found herself pondering the scene she'd witnessed so briefly, and how it defied everything that she knew in her heart: that Ron loved her and would never do this to her, not after what they'd been through; not after the words he'd spoken in that hospital room, and how tender and caring and sweet he'd been...

"Hermione, darling? Are you home?"

"Up here, Mum," she called as she sat up in bed, picking up her pillow and clutching it to herself.

Hermione heard the telling thud of her mother's trainers as she jogged up the stairs, and moments later there was a gentle knock on her door before it was pushed open: Jean Granger was dressed in her usual work attire, but her brunette hair was all sleek and smoothed back, her make-up utter perfection. It never failed to amaze Hermione how her mother somehow always managed to look immaculate, even when she'd spent the last four hours with her hands shoved in other peoples' mouths.

"Sweetheart, what are you doing home? Are you ill? I received a notice from your school, and I was so worried that something awful had happened..."

"I'm fine, Mum," she said quickly, her heart racing at the prospect of spilling her news to her mother, who had crossed the room and was now perched on the end of Hermione's bed, a concerned/curious expression on her face. "Just a bit...tired, is all."

"Yes, you do tend to overwork yourself, don't you?" Mum replied affectionately as she reached out to cup her daughter's face. "So like your father, you are. All work and no play, the pair of you."

In more ways than one, Hermione thought, musing over how she'd inherited her father's features and thick, impossible hair, rather than her mother's smooth tresses and delicate facial structure.

"Hermione," Mum said abruptly, her tone growing stern as she tilted Hermione's chin upward. "Tell me this isn't what I think it is. Tell me this is the result of some sort of magical fungus, or that you somehow bruised your neck..."

Hermione jerked her chin away from her mother's grasp, her face growing warm as her hands flew up to shield the marks that Ron had branded her with—and which she'd completely forgotten about.

"Hermione. Jean. Granger." Her mother's voice was somewhere between consternation and amusement. "I must say, I'm rather astounded. Are you having sex, dear? If so, are you being careful? Of course you are—you *are* your father's daughter, after all. So who's the boy? Is it your friend, Ron? Your father would be so pleased. Well...not by the fact that you're having sex, obviously, but he rather likes that family, the Weasleys, so if it had to be *someone*, then we'd prefer —"

"Mum!" Hermione yelped, mortification coloring her voice as her head dropped into her hands. Even after seventeen years she was somehow still dumbfounded by her mother's frankness—not to mention her rambling ability to hit the nail on the head. Well, other than the "careful" part, but that had been out of Hermione's control.

"What? It's so obvious that you fancy him, darling. Why else would you keep requesting to visit his home? Certainly not for the scones alone, I would think. As it happens, I was telling your father just the other day how surprising it is that it's taken you—"

"Mother," the younger woman groaned, shaking her head, which was still covered by her arms. "Could you stop? Please? This is serious."

"Serious?" Immediately, Mum's demeanor changed as she leaned back, crossing her arms and regarding her only daughter pointedly. "You can't possibly be pregnant, because that would be so *un-you*, and I raised you better than that, at any rate. And tell me it's not an STD—because I thought you said that Hogwarts students were inoculated against—"

"It's not an STD, Mother," Hermione cut in, flabbergasted, as she raised her head to glare at her mother. "And, yes, children in Wizarding society are administered a series of potions to render them immune to—oh, what does it matter? I do *not* have a sexually transmitted disease!"

There was a lingering pause before Mum exclaimed, "My first guess was right, wasn't it? That boy has impregnated you!"

"Oh, honestly, Mother, a couple of—of—"

"Hickeys."

"Right." Hermione felt herself blushing deeply. "A couple of *those*, and the conclusion that you naturally come to is that I must be pregnant. How refreshing to know that you have so much faith in me." Never mind that it was true; it wasn't as if this was the result of irresponsibility on her part: She would've *died* if she hadn't had sex.

"You're forgetting that I was once an impressionable, *hormonal* young girl as well, and I'm fully aware that you're stalling, young lady. Just answer the question: Are you pregnant or aren't you?"

The young witch took a deep breath, bracing herself for her answer; when she'd made the decision to request to come home for the weekend, she hadn't even been certain whether or not she was actually going to tell her parents just yet, but now she had no choice: She simply could not lie to her mother, because the woman had the rather infuriating ability to see right through her. "It's a bit...complicated," she finally said, picking her words carefully, "but, in effect, yes. I'm... pregnant." There. She'd said it.

She cringed, waiting for her mother's response; honestly, she had no idea what to expect. Mum

might start shouting or she might start laughing. Strangely, both reactions would be quite in character for Jean Granger.

"Really, Hermione, didn't you *use* anything?" the older woman finally blurted, rising to her feet as she began pacing in front of the bed. "I *know* you, and you're smarter than this. You have a plan for everything. You're prepared for *everything*—and I've been drilling into your head the importance of contraception from the time you were old enough to understand the difference between boys and girls—"

"Mother, I know, but—"

"I *told* your father that we should've insisted on putting you on the pill, just to be on the safe side," she charged on as if she hadn't heard her daughter, continuing to pace back and forth across the rug, "since you're up at that castle with its co-ed common rooms and barely any adult supervision at all. This is completely my fault; I should've been more persistent. I should've put my foot down and said, 'Hugo, I'm well aware that Hermione is a smart girl, but even she is capable of succumbing to normal adolescent urges, and it's best to be prepared—'"

"Mum, it's not your fault," Hermione cut in quickly. "Please, just let me explain."

Mum stopped pacing abruptly, turning to face her daughter with her arms crossed over her chest. "Fine. Speak. Convince me that you didn't betray our trust in you."

Hermione flushed hotly, feeling torn between shame and annoyance. After all, it wasn't as if this incident was resultant of any blunder of her own; she'd merely been in the wrong place at the wrong time. *Well, you did step on that potion bottle because you were too busy rowing with Ron to pay attention to what you were doing*, she reminded herself. *Then blame Ron!* she argued back angrily. "Well, there I was in detention... I assume you remember the letter you got from Hogwarts at the start of term?"

"Yes, you attacked Ron," she replied dryly. "As I also recall, you weren't on speaking terms with him when you came home for Christmas." Mum's eyes widened suddenly before dropping to Hermione's mid-section. "Oh my God, is that why? Were you pregnant even then?"

"No," Hermione assured her quickly. "Mum, believe me, this is a *very* recent, unexpected development. You see, there was an accident—"

"Hermione, if this story ends with anything along the lines of, 'He slipped and his penis fell in my vagina—'"

"Mum, that's vulgar!" Hermione exclaimed, feeling stunned—though she probably shouldn't have been so surprised, knowing her mother's frank manner.

"No, darling, that was blunt. Now, if I were being *vulgar*, I might have said—"

"All right," Hermione said loudly, raising one hand for emphasis. "It's fine. You don't have to... elaborate."

"Although *you* should. By all means, please tell me about this accident that resulted in my daughter having unprotected sex and consequently becoming pregnant while on school grounds."

"I was exposed to a potion," she said quickly, not giving her mother another opportunity to interrupt. "A vile potion that forces the one being afflicted to have sex or die. If you don't believe me, you can either ask Professor McGonagall or owl Healer Athena Thorson at St. Mungo's; they'll both tell you the same thing. I was only just released this morning from the Wizarding hospital, and Professor McGonagall gave me leave to come here to inform you and Dad that the

incident resulted in my having conceived fraternal twins."

The older woman stared at her daughter for a moment, clearly processing this information. "Oh, Hermione," she whispered after the space of several lingering heartbeats, crossing the room and engulfing her daughter in a fierce hug. "My precious girl. I'm so sorry, baby. I should've believed you—I should've known that there had to be some explanation other than..."

"It's okay, Mum," Hermione whispered, returning her mother's embrace as the tears rose in her eyes, and she didn't bother trying to suppress them or wipe them away this time; the effort was becoming entirely too daunting, and she was rather sick of trying to hide the strongest of her emotions. "I—it'll be okay." Considering her relatively extensive vocabulary, it was somewhat remarkable that she was suddenly at a loss for words.

"We'll figure this out together," Mum said firmly, pulling back slightly so that she could peer into her daughter's eyes. She caressed the younger woman's face with both hands, her thumbs swiping tenderly at her tears. "Sweetheart, I hate to be insensitive, but I have to ask: Have you considered all of your options? Have you thought about...adoption?"

Hermione shook her head quickly, averting her eyes as she thought of her hastily conceived plan to send her children off with her parents in the event that Voldemort should rise to power.

"Of course you have," Mum whispered as she leaned forward and embraced her daughter once more. "You always consider everything, you beautiful, brilliant girl. All right. If you're determined to do this—and I know you are—we'll figure this out; we'll find a way to make it work that doesn't involve you getting married and being stuck at home all day while your husband provides—not that there's anything wrong with staying home with your children," she tacked on quickly, and Hermione got the impression that her mother was thinking of Mrs. Weasley. "It's quite noble and respectable, actually, but you just have far too much potential to be relegated to the house.

"Perhaps—perhaps you could come back home for the time being. Your father and I would help you in any way that we could, of course—to help you get on your feet. You could attend a proper university, and we would cover the cost of daycare, obviously. You would have to work extra hard, but—"

"I appreciate that, Mum, truly, but I can assure you that I'm *not* thinking about getting married," she said bitterly, trying not to envision herself in a white gown, standing next to a tall, ginger-haired groom, "and they're still letting me go to school. Hogwarts isn't chucking me; Professor McGonagall says that special arrangements will be made for both me and Ron, and Mrs. Weasley already volunteered her assistance—"

"So it *is* Ron," Mum interrupted, her tone neutral. "He's the father—and the Weasleys already know?"

Hermione nodded, ignoring the lead ball that formed in the pit of her stomach at the thought of Ron. "He doesn't come of age until this Saturday, so the school had no choice but to inform his parents, and I...well, I elected not to inform you—not until I knew with absolute certainty if I'd become...you know...pregnant." The word still felt strange on her tongue; everything was happening entirely too quickly.

"You don't always have to do everything alone, you know," Mum said softly. "Your dad and I most assuredly wouldn't have *liked* the situation, but we love you more than anything. Believe me, sweetheart, I'm more than aware—as much as I hate to admit it—that we're not a part of your 'world,' but we're here for you nonetheless."

"I know that you're here for me," Hermione responded immediately, pushing her hair behind her

ears, "and of course you're a part of my world—you're a *huge* part of my world, Mum—but I was embarrassed, and I didn't want you to know unless it was absolutely necessary; it was just far too humiliating."

"I understand, and I don't blame you: I wouldn't have wanted to tell *my* mother, either. So," she added with a that-settles-that sort of air as she stood up once more. "I suppose you already have a lot to think about, and I'm sure you've had enough talk for now, especially considering that you'll have to do this all over again with your father when he comes home in a few hours—but I have many questions concerning this potion and how you came in contact with it; and believe me—I plan on writing a strongly-worded letter to your Headmaster concerning this matter."

"I wouldn't expect anything less, Mother," Hermione said sweetly as she stood up as well, but on the inside she was dreading the prospect of telling her father with an intense fervor.

"I took the rest of the day off to spend with my lovely daughter," Mum said as she draped her arm through Hermione's. "Come downstairs, darling. You look positively famished; I'll order you something to eat, and you can choose something to watch on the telly. How does Thai sound?"

"Positively spectacular."

"If you'd like some company other than myself, I could always call up your cousin, Caitlyn. She's always dying to know when you're coming home next..."

Hermione groaned. "Now you're just torturing me."

"Rubbish. You two were so close as children."

"Yes, well, one of us grew up, but the other one is still about ten."

"Oh, honestly, Hermione, don't be so hard on yourself..."

oOo

It was raining. Again. And the wind certainly wasn't helping matters, as visibility was reduced to practically zero, and broomsticks struggled against the push-and-pull of the elements.

At least it's only practice, Harry thought as he removed his glasses and attempted to dry them on his soaking-wet robes. Besides, chances were good that they'd be playing in this kind of weather in their upcoming match against Hufflepuff, so they might as well get used to it.

As he placed his glasses back on his face, he squinted against the grayish murk that comprised the Quidditch pitch, his eyes focusing on a blob of brightest red that he knew to be Ron's head, over by the goal posts, and currently that blob of red was letting out a long string of rather creative curses.

"Hey, Weasley, do you kiss your mother with that mouth?" someone, possibly Peakes, one of the Beaters, bellowed as someone else guffawed loudly.

"Fuck off!" Ron roared in response.

Harry shook his head grimly, thinking that he'd been mad to think that Ron would still be up for the scheduled Thursday-night practice after Hermione had been poisoned by that strange potion—all his best mate would say about it was that it had been excruciating for Hermione—and then she'd disappeared sometime before lunch. Harry hadn't even seen her, but McGonagall had told him and Ron that she'd gone home for the remainder of the week for some much-needed rest.

Actually, Ron and McGonagall were both being tight-lipped about the whole thing, and Harry supposed it wasn't any of his business—if Hermione wanted him to know more, then she'd tell him—but Ron had been in an agitated state since they'd found out about Hermione's departure, barely speaking, so, needless to say, he hadn't been able to save anything all practice.

In all fairness, though, *no one* had been able to do shite all practice, thanks to this mess, and what little daylight they'd had to begin with was quickly fading. In a few minutes he wouldn't be able to see a foot in front of him.

"All right, guys, that's enough for today!" he shouted into the wind as he landed on the soggy ground, hoping that his teammates could hear him. "I'll let you all know when I schedule the next practice!" He didn't even bother saying, "Good practice," because he knew that they'd know that it was a complete load of rubbish, as it had been a rather *pointless* practice.

He was greeted by the general sound of relief from those on the pitch, and Ginny called out, "See ya back in the common room, Harry!" and he knew that his message had been heard.

When he trudged his way through the mud to the locker room, it was to find that Ron was the sole occupant, which was unsurprising, given that his teammates usually preferred to clean up in their dormitories.

His best mate was sitting on a long bench, still in his muddy Quidditch robes and staring blankly at the nearby row of lockers; his nose was bloodied from when the Quaffle had caught him square in the face, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Oi," Harry said by way of greeting, and he watched as his friend's eyes slowly found his, and Ron seemed vaguely surprised to see Harry standing there. "All right, Ron?"

"Oh, hey, Harry." His tone was disinterested as his eyes drifted back to stare at the lockers. "Y'know, I'm beginning t'think that 'Ermione's right, mate. Maybe Quidditch really *is* just a game."

Harry gaped at him; he would've been less astonished if Ron had started speaking Gobbledegook. "Look, Ron, I know you're upset about her leaving, but you heard McGonagall; she'll be back Sunday night—"

"She's pregnant."

He'd spoken so softly that Harry was sure that he'd misunderstood. "Come again?"

"She's pregnant," Ron repeated, and there was no mistaking his words this time. Harry stared at him, his mind reeling as he came to the conclusion that Ron couldn't possibly be talking about Hermione. Did he mean that he'd gotten Lavender pregnant, then?

That would've come as a shock even if the rumors *hadn't* been flying all over school about their very public break-up that morning.

"Who's pregnant?" Harry asked, just to be sure. "Lavender?"

Ron looked at him again, an expression of repulsion on his face. "No, mate. Hermione. *Hermione's* pregnant."

Chapter 16: Jagged Pieces

Chapter Sixteen: Jagged Pieces

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

oOo

"No, mate. Hermione. *Hermione's* pregnant."

Harry froze as he stared back at him, unblinking, in an expression that would've been a bloody riot if Ron hadn't felt like his insides were being chewed up by a flock of angry Cornish Pixies.

In the meantime, the locker room was so damned silent that it was as if the world around them had ceased to be; time itself had stopped, this very moment ballooning and swelling until nothing else mattered. Well, at least that's how it *would've* seemed if it hadn't been for the steady pattering of the rain on the rooftop and the distant howling of the wind, a reminder that the world went on as usual. Why would the cosmos care if Ron Weasley's heart was slowly but painfully fragmenting into tiny, jagged pieces?

A ricocheting thunderclap broke the spell, and Harry blinked at him behind his rain-smeared spectacles. "Wh-what?" he finally managed to stammer out. "She's...what? Are—are you sure? Why—I mean, who—how d'you know?"

"'Cause I'm the one who bloody did it," Ron declared miserably, unable to hold his friend's gaze any longer. Vaguely, he was aware that Hermione probably didn't want anyone to know—too ashamed, he reckoned—but Harry was his best mate, too, wasn't he? Not that Ron was a tit that liked to talk about feelings and stuff like a girl, but he felt like he might explode if he didn't tell *someone*, and that someone might as well be his best mate.

His parents had tried talking to him a bit that morning, but Ron had let them do all the talking, making noncommittal noises and nodding at the appropriate times as Mum had reiterated the importance of finishing his education and Dad had reassured him that he was going to be a good father. It had been a relief when Dad had finally announced that he had to get back to work, and so Ron had practically pushed them in the direction of his Head of House's hearth, eager to get rid of them despite their good intentions—especially after an embarrassing display in which his mum had insisted on fawning all over him like a toddler in the corridors. Right in front of a gaggle of fifth year Slytherin girls.

Not that it mattered, really. He'd just been determined to get rid of his mum and dad so he could find Hermione, but then McGonagall had informed him that she'd gone home to give her parents the news.

Without a bleedin' word to Ron about her intentions.

He had no clue what to make of her running off like that; all he knew was that he'd been left with a sinking feeling of dread and confusion in the pit of his stomach, especially when he thought about how she'd never said that she loved him back. And how scared she'd seemed in that hospital room when they'd found out that a couple of his Weasley swimmers had gotten through. (No shocks there, really, but still.)

"You—WHAT?" Harry suddenly bellowed, startling Ron out of his thoughts, only to find his best

mate gawking at him in an expression that could only be described as shock.

Ron nodded mechanically, thinking that it was no big surprise that Harry was surprised. She was *Hermione*, wasn't she? And he was just Ron: nothing particularly special. Without that potion, it was doubtful she would've let him touch her with a ten-foot pole.

Much less let him stick his knob in her...well, you get the picture.

"Wait, let me make sure I'm understanding this correctly," Harry said as he removed his glasses and wiped them pointlessly on his sopping-wet robes before placing them back on his face. "You—you're telling me that you and...and Hermione...?"

Ron just stared back at him with one raised eyebrow, his ears warming considerably: Did Harry really want him to spell it out?

"Wow...I mean, *wow*.... I didn't even think you two were talking." Harry's voice was still shocked, but there was now quite a bit of incredulity mixed in there as well. "Just yesterday she was still hacked off at you..."

"Yeah, well, we didn't have much of a choice, did we?" He was faintly surprised by the bitterness in his voice. Sure, being with Hermione like that had been something he'd dreamed about for years, but in his dreams she'd been *happy* about it; she hadn't run for the hills the second she could get away from him. And the fact that she hadn't bothered telling him where she was going or what she was doing weighed heavily on him, making him feel like she was already excluding him from the pregnancy. She was making it pretty damned clear that she didn't wanna be with him, but did that also mean she didn't want him to be involved in the pregnancy or the babies' lives?

"What d'you mean?" Harry asked as he moved to sit next to him on the bench, his attention fully captured. "Is this the part where I get the full story on whathappened with that potion last night?"

Without further preamble, Ron launched into the story, starting with being awoken by McGonagall in the early hours of the morning. He explained as much as he could, doing more than his share of blushing, and skating over the part where he and Hermione had had to do the deed. Harry was staring at him in stunned disbelief as Ron told him about how the Healer had confirmed that she'd conceived fraternal twins, and that Hermione had seemed less than thrilled about it.

"And then I came back to school to break up with Lavender," Ron was saying, "to prove to Hermione that I'm serious about...well, her, the—the babies"—his face warmed at the word—"everything, and the next thing I know, she just...bolts. She just *left*, Harry, without a bloody word to me. I've no sodding idea what's going on in that brain of hers."

As he finished up his spiel, the expression on Harry's face was appropriately sympathetic but clearly uncomfortable. Sure, they'd talked about girls on occasion, but he and Harry never got into sordid details—while Seamus had hounded Ron for info about what he'd done with Lavender, Harry had made it clear he would've rather been hexed—and this was *Hermione* they were talking about. Very tricky territory. "Er—you didn't talk to her at all?" Harry finally asked him, quite obviously reaching for something to say, since he already knew the answer to that question.

"Nope. Did she happen to say anything to you?"

"Nope."

An awkward silence descended in which the boys sat side-by-side stiffly, both staring at the lockers and listening to the rapid tattoo of the rain against the roof.

"I reckon," Harry said after a moment, his voice cutting through the discomfiture, "that maybe she just needs some time to get her head on straight, is all. I'm sure this is a lot for her to take in. Blimey, this is a lot for *me* to take in. I mean, you and Hermione? *Twins?*"

"Yeah, time for it to sink in that *I'm* the one who did this to her," Ron retorted, unable to focus on anything past the first part of his friend's statement. "Time for it to sink in that she hates me, 'cause it's all my fault, Harry. If I'd—"

"She would've died, Ron," Harry said reasonably, turning to face him slightly on the bench. "You couldn't have let that happen. You would've done anything in your power to help her."

"Yeah, but she wouldn't've needed saving in the first place if I hadn't distracted her by starting that row in Filch's office. And it didn't really have to be me, did it? I wanted to be the one 'cause I was selfish, 'cause I wanted her and couldn't stand the thought of anyone else touching her like that, and I reckon she was just too nice to tell me to send for Fred or George or Charlie."

Harry was quiet for a long moment, seeming to weigh his response before finally saying, his voice once again brimming with incredulity, "You can't really think that."

"And why can't I? She obviously doesn't want me—"

When Harry burst into laughter, it was Ron's turn to do the gaping, feeling torn between annoyance and bafflement that he was actually being *laughed* at, now of all times.

"Are you barking?" Harry finally choked out when he'd calmed a bit. "You can't really believe she's not mad for you?"

"What are you on about?" Ron grumbled, feeling like his best mate was taking the piss and not at all in the mood for it.

"Ron, she asked you to Slughorn's party, didn't she?" Harry reminded him, his tone exasperated. "D'you somehow not know how happy she was when she thought you were going with her? And what about the jealousy when you got together with Lavender instead? The birds she set on you? What about the way she tried to make *you* jealous by taking McLaggen to the party instead? You didn't actually think she was interested in him, did you?"

Ron experienced a now-familiar pang of guilt as he stared at the little white, crescent-shaped scars that still decorated his forearms and the backs of his hands; it was all so obvious when it was laid out like that, which only further served to make him feel like the world's biggest prat.

Not to mention like a complete idiot.

"Look, Ron, I'm not really good with this sort of thing," Harry admitted after an awkward pause. "Living with the Dursleys didn't exactly afford me many opportunities to discuss feelings and whatnot, but I'll say this: These past couple of months when Hermione would break down in front of me, because of you, I never knew what to say, but I always just listened and hoped it was enough. So what I'm telling you is that I can say with a fair amount of certainty that you're the only one she wanted, the only one she would've asked for." He paused once more before adding, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips, "O'course, I don't quite get the appeal myself, what with the combination of you being freckly, ginger-haired, and freakishly tall. Really, mate, you'd fit in quite nicely at the circus."

Ron allowed himself a chuckle at Harry's obvious attempt to lighten the mood, not even bothering to ask what a circus was, but his laughter quickly died as everything else his friend had said twisted in Ron's gut like a knife: How often had Hermione cried on Harry's shoulder over him,

anyway? And Ron had been completely oblivious because he'd been too busy gluing his face to Lavender's.

Despite the guilt—or maybe because of it—his row with Hermione yesterday evening suddenly came back to him with startling clarity: Had they not all but admitted their feelings for each other? Okay, sure, they'd both been hacked off at the other, but it didn't change the underlying facts. "*I wanted it to be you!*" Hermione had shouted at him about taking McLaggen to Slughorn's party.

And then after that last time they'd made love (Ron felt like a tit for thinking that phrase, but that was the best way he could think to put it) early that very morning, she'd seemed... Well, there had been love in her eyes and in her actions. He was sure of it.

So why hadn't she told him that she loved him, too? Why had she run away?

"I reckon you're right," Ron conceded after a moment, daring to let hope raise its head and take a cautious sniff of the air. "Maybe she's just...confused and scared and...just needed her mum and dad."

"That's the spirit," Harry said, clapping him on the back before standing up. "But if it's still bothering you, why don't you just send her an owl?"

"Yeah," Ron replied slowly as he, too, rose to his feet. "Yeah, maybe I will."

"Brilliant."

"Hey, Harry? Why didn't you ever tell me about Hermione...y'know...crying over me?"

His best mate had the decency to look sheepish as she shrugged. "Like I said, I'm not really good with this stuff. Besides, I knew Hermione would murder me if she ever found out I told you. You know how scary she can be, and I doubt being the Chosen One would get me off the hook."

Ron let out a genuine chortle. "Yeah, you're right about that, mate. In that case, consider yourself forgiven."

"Sorted," Harry replied, returning his grin. "I don't know about you, but I'm freezing my backside off. Let's get up to the castle, get warmed up, yeah? I think Seamus might even have some butterbeers leftover from last weekend."

It wasn't until that moment that Ron realized he was shivering violently in his muddy, sopping-wet Quidditch robes. He supposed he could've used a Drying Charm, at the very least, but he'd barely registered the cold.

"So...twins," Harry said, shooting him a sideways glance as they ducked back out of the changing rooms, making their way up to the castle at a jog through the still-pouring rain. "Wow... I mean, that's...you and Hermione...*wow*. Fred and George are gonna take the Mickey for sure when they find out."

oOo

Jean Granger held her breath as she stared between her husband and daughter, awaiting Hugo's reaction.

The three of them were in the sitting room, Hermione perched in Hugo's favorite armchair, a throw pillow clutched in her lap, while Jean sat on the sofa with her husband, one of his hands in both of hers. Hermione had just revealed to her dad her entire story, and Hugo had remained uncharacteristically silent throughout, the expression on his face closed off and unreadable.

It was quite disconcerting, actually, since Hugo Granger was a passionate man, prone to speaking out rather than holding his tongue; she supposed they had that in common, along with dentistry and the outdoors, of course. Conversely, Hugo was similar to their daughter in looks, determination, intelligence, and a strong sense of morality: The two of them could sit around the dinner table for hours debating and discussing topics of a multitude of varieties, long after Jean had excused herself and gone up to bed.

Hugo and Hermione had always shared a special bond that Jean couldn't touch, and she'd never been jealous of that fact. Quite the contrary, she'd nurtured and supported it, even though Hermione hadn't been around as often as they would have liked over the course of the last few years. Despite being closed off to certain major aspects of their daughter's life, however, that bond had miraculously thrived.

As Jean alternately studied her daughter's rather gaunt, nervous-looking face—she was even thinner than she'd been at Christmas—and her husband's expressionless countenance, she truly feared for that bond for the first time.

She knew instinctively that now was the time to interfere, to perform some preventive maintenance before that bond had the opportunity to rupture: "Hugo, I know this is a lot of information to take in at once. Maybe you'd like a brandy while—"

"Jean, sweetheart, may I speak to you in the kitchen?"

Uh-oh. She knew that quiet steeliness, and it wasn't a good sign. Hugo was hacked off, but he was trying to keep it together for the sake of their daughter.

"Of course, darling. Hermione, I'll bring out more biscuits and tea when I come back."

She then slipped out of the sitting room and led the way to the kitchen across the hall. Once she'd closed the door behind her husband, she turned to find him in a seeming daze. Following his gaze, she saw that he was staring at a framed photograph on the windowsill of Hermione at her eighth birthday party: Hugo's arms were around his daughter as she grinned toothily up at the camera, silly paper party hats adorning both their heads. There hadn't been many people in attendance that day; just Jean's parents, Emily and Roy, and sister, Suzanne (Hugo's mum and dad had been on holiday), little Tommy and Caitlyn and their dad, Hugo's brother, Charles.

Hermione had never needed a horde of friends rallied around her to be happy; just one or two people to support her, and that's why Jean and Hugo had been pleased when Hermione had found two close friends at her strange school. It hadn't even particularly bothered them that those two friends happened to be boys, because Jean herself had always gotten along better with the opposite sex as well—although it had led to some interesting complications in her later teen years.

As it had for Hermione as well, seeing as how she was now impregnated by one of those boys—not by any fault of her own, of course.

"When we agreed to send our only child to that school," Hugo finally said, "we took a leap of faith. We knew absolutely nothing about that school, or that world, beyond what Albus Dumbledore showed us."

That was a day that Jean would never forget: When a tall, eccentric, bearded man had shown up on their doorstep and explained that he was the Headmaster of a school created especially to nurture children with abilities like Hermione's. Children with the ability to perform magic.

Jean and Hugo had argued for days: Hugo had wanted their daughter to continue with a "proper"

education, while Jean, who'd witnessed firsthand on several occasions Hermione's special talents, thought that they should give this school, and this Albus Dumbledore, a chance.

Ultimately, they'd chosen to allow their mature-for-her-age daughter to make the decision for herself—and it had seemed like a good course of action at the time: Hermione had seemed happy when she'd come home, and Jean and Hugo had quickly been befriended by Molly and Arthur Weasley, who helped them to not feel so cut off from their daughter's new "world." Given present circumstances, however, Jean couldn't help but wonder if it had been a mistake. If only Hermione had chosen to stay in this world, she could be preparing right now for university; she wouldn't be facing the prospect of teenage motherhood in a world where there were whispers of danger.

Jean suspected that her daughter wasn't always forthright with information concerning goings-on in the magical community, but she'd mentioned on occasion a man with corrupt intentions who wished to overthrow their government and start a new regime. Likewise, Molly had let something similar slip a time or two over the years, giving Jean the impression that the magical community wasn't the safest place to be at the moment—hence the reason she and Hugo had been attempting to persuade Hermione to attend university after her graduation from Hogwarts rather than pursuing a career in the Wizarding world.

"We made the decision to trust them with our daughter," Hugo continued, his words so inline with her own thoughts that it was as if her husband was reading her mind. "And they failed to protect her; by extension, *we* failed her."

"It was an accident, Hugo," she said reasonably, moving to stand at the island, plucking an orange out of the fruit bowl and absently turning it over in her hands. "It wasn't anyone's fault."

"Yes, an accident," he concurred. "That hardly dismisses accountability. They were allowing children to handle dangerous, unknown substances while unsupervised."

"She's hardly a child—"

"She's seventeen," he stated flatly.

"Yes, thank you, darling," Jean replied, annoyance creeping into her tone. "I'm aware of how old she is, and that's the age of consent—"

"In *their* world, Jean, not ours—*not* ours. We're her parents, and she is our child. We should have been informed, we should have had some say."

"All right, Hugo," she said with a sigh, setting the orange back in its bowl. "What exactly do you propose that we do? Sue the school?" She raised one eyebrow, knowing that the irony wouldn't be lost on him.

"Of course not, sweetheart." He brought up a hand to absently rub his temples, something he only did when he was particularly frustrated. "But I do expect them to take full responsibility for this and to take measures to prevent something similar from happening to someone else's kid in the future."

"And I'm sure that they'll do just that," Jean soothed him as she moved around the island and gently pried her husband's hand from his face, squeezing it in her own as she looked up into his brown eyes that were so similar to their daughter's. "And I won't stop you from requesting a meeting with the Headmaster so that you may personally express to him your feelings regarding this matter; actually, I wouldn't mind giving him a piece of my mind as well. In the meantime, what's done is done, and you have a daughter in the other room in desperate need of reassurance that her father still loves her and doesn't blame her."

Hugo regarded his wife for a moment, clearly considering her words, before cracking a gentle smile. "Of course you're right, darling, as always," he whispered as he pressed his lips against her forehead.

Without another word, he retreated, turning and exiting the kitchen. Quietly, Jean followed him and lingered in the doorway to the sitting room, watching on as her daughter jumped to her feet at her father's abrupt reappearance, her eyes wide and unsure as Hugo stalked toward her. But then he engulfed Hermione in his strong arms, whispering words that only she could hear, before dissolving into tears, clinging to her father the way she had when she was a little girl.

oOo

By Friday evening, he still hadn't quite worked out exactly what he wanted to say to Hermione in his letter. He'd actually gotten up early that morning with the intention of writing the letter and heading straight up to the owlery, but after multiple scratch-outs and a whole lotta wadded-up parchment, he'd given up and decided to try again later.

All day long, Ron had been distracted, unable to think about anything but Hermione and the fact that she was carrying his twins. Actually, he'd been so preoccupied that he'd hardly noticed the whispers and stares in his direction, but he dismissed this, thinking that his classmates had nothing better to do than speculate over why Hermione had been hospitalized and what Ron had had to do with it.

Now, as he headed back to the Gryffindor common room after a somehow duller-than-usual prefects' meeting and rounds, he'd just about decided that he'd simply write the first thing that came to mind when he got back up to his dorm—whatever came out first had to be the most honest, right?—and then he'd go straight up to send his letter off with Pig.

Ron was feeling pretty good about that decision as he climbed through the portrait hole, barely registering the stragglers that hung about the common room as he headed straight to the staircase leading to the boys' dormitories—but he found his path suddenly blocked.

Feeling supremely annoyed, Ron raised his eyes off of the floor to find Parvati Patil standing in front of him, her arms crossed over her chest.

Bloody hell, Ron thought, even as he felt a pang of guilt at the sight of Lavender's best friend.

"Setting aside, for the moment, the fact that you treated my best friend like a plaything," she began in lieu of any sort of greeting, "I thought you should know, in case you somehow don't, what everyone's saying about you."

Ron stared at her blankly, even as he thought about the whispers that he'd been ignoring all day long.

"I gather from the rather stupid-looking expression on your face that you have no clue," she said with a roll of her eyes. "Well, here it is: Romilda Vane is telling everyone that you got Hermione pregnant. She says that she waited for Harry after Quidditch practice last night, and that she heard you telling him in the locker room. I just...I thought you should know."

Chapter 17: The Whole Picture

Chapter Seventeen: The Whole Picture

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Eighteen: Birthday Surprises.

oOo

Ron groaned as he rolled over and pulled his pillow over his head, shielding his eyes from the bright morning sunlight and feeling more than a bit hacked off at Dean and Seamus for making as much noise as they possibly effing could this early on a Saturday.

Wankers, he thought as he fell back into a light doze, drifting, somewhere in that hazy space between sleep and wakefulness as his mind held onto the last threads of his disturbing dreams. He remembered running through some sort of deep, endless building with identical passageways, frantically trying to get to something...or someone—and then it came to him: A crying baby; he'd been searching desperately for a crying baby whose pitiful wails had grown weaker the longer he'd uselessly searched.

"Happy birthday, Ron," Harry's voice piped up from the direction of his bed, a tad too cheerfully for Ron's liking. "Have a present." Then Ron heard something land at the foot of his bed.

That's right. He was seventeen today. *Whoopy-friggin'-doo*. He was practically jumping for joy.

He'd had to endure more whispers and stares, and because he had no bloody clue what Hermione would want him to say, his strategy thus far had been to pretend not to notice. Although, that had been a bit hard to do when a highly emotional Lavender had confronted him last night, demanding to know if the rumors were true; caught off guard, Ron had stammered out a "yeah" before he could think better of it—which had earned him a hard slap across the face just before she'd hissed the words "cheating rat bastard" at him and stalked away.

Cheating rat bastard.

Cheater.

He sat up in bed and rubbed his bleary eyes, the words reverberating guiltily in his mind, making him think about the conversation he'd had with his dad just before he'd "visited" Hermione in her hospital room.

Being called names, Ron could handle—he'd grown up with Fred and George, hadn't he?—but the thought of what they might be saying about Hermione made his stomach churn and his blood boil, so he reckoned he oughtta find Lavender today, explain what had happened with that potion, but he doubted that she'd even believe him, so why bother?

To make matters worse, he hadn't heard back from Hermione. He'd decided not to mention in his letter the fact that the whole school knew about their little predicament because he didn't want her worrying about it while she was at home with her parents. Instead, he'd simply told her that he missed her—the declaration might make him sound like a tit, but at least it was honest—and that he hoped everything was going okay with her mum and dad.

He reckoned he could always just wait around outside McGonagall's door Sunday evening so he could warn her in person that everyone was talking about them.

Yeah. That's what he'd do. It was as good a plan as any, wasn't it?

Feeling a tad heartened by that planned course of action, and reminding himself what Harry had said to him yesterday about Hermione's feelings, Ron scooted to the edge of the bed and peered at the moderate-sized stack of presents on his trunk that had accumulated there overnight.

As he plucked up the one on top, the one that Harry had just tossed there, he couldn't help but feel hopeful that he might have something from Hermione—but given everything that had happened and what she'd gone home to do, he knew it was probably too much to hope for.

"Cheers," he said to Harry, who was now rummaging in his own trunk, as Ron tore into the wrappings: "Nice one, Harry!" he added, managing to work up genuine enthusiasm as he admired the smart, new Keeper gloves that his best mate had given him.

Harry muttered something in reply, but Ron barely noticed as he tore into the other presents, which included a handsome, golden watch from Mum and Dad, showing them to his best mate as he went; he couldn't help but feel disappointed when he reached the bottom of the pile and confirmed that there wasn't anything there from Hermione—not even a letter.

And then he saw the box of Chocolate Cauldrons next to his bed.

Figuring that they must have fallen off his pile of presents, he scooped them up off of the floor before flopping back down on his bed as he searched for a note. Finding none, he popped one of the chocolates into his mouth with a shrug. As he savored the velvety sweetness, it crossed his mind that they could be from Lavender, but he doubted it: She bloody hated him now, didn't she?

"Want one?" he offered, holding the box out to Harry.

"No, thanks," Harry said distractedly, his eyes trained steadfastly on the map opened in his lap. "Malfoy's gone again!"

Ron barely managed not to roll his eyes at that. *Harry and his bloody obsession with Malfoy.* "Can't have done," he said reasonably before popping a second chocolate into his mouth and reluctantly climbing to his feet once more. "Come on, if you don't hurry up, you'll have to Apparate on an empty stomach... Might make it easier, I suppose..."

His voice trailed off as he stared at the box still clutched in his hands, thinking about Hermione... about how good it had felt to touch her silken skin, to taste her, how tight and slick she'd felt...

Ron shuddered pleasurably at the memory as he absently ate another one of the decadent sweets, his eyes closed, savoring the taste and trying not to think about her huge, orb-like black eyes, her shiny black hair...

Wait, black eyes and hair?

It hit him all at once, the simplicity of the fact becoming sharply clear, as if he was emerging from a fog that he hadn't even been aware of: Romilda. He was positively mad for Romilda Vane.

He frowned at the absurdity of the thought. Of course he didn't fancy that silly little blabber-mouth of a bird...

And yet, he couldn't deny the powerful emotions that were barreling him over, just thinking of her name: Romilda. *Romilda.* Unusual but kinda pretty, wasn't it?

Wait, what? No—you love Hermione, remember? Hermione Granger.

But it didn't seem to matter what his brain was telling him, because he was staggered by abrupt but undeniable feelings for someone else that he couldn't control, rendering all else inconsequential. He stared out the window, studying the pattern of raindrops on the glass as he pondered this inexplicable turn of events, trying with all of his might to battle these ridiculous newfound emotions, feeling horrified with himself and desperately attempting to conjure up images of Hermione, but he was losing the war—

"Ron?" He realized that Harry was speaking to him, a note of impatience in his voice.
"Breakfast."

"I'm not hungry," he stated, feeling a bit sickened as he lost the will to stop himself from fantasizing about running his fingers through Romilda Vane's hair.

Harry stared back at him, his expression puzzled. "I thought you just said—"

"Well, all right," Ron reluctantly agreed, "I'll come down with you, but I don't wanna eat."

"You've just eaten half a box of Chocolate Cauldrons, haven't you?" his best mate accused quietly, undoubtedly thinking that that's what was affecting his appetite.

"It's not that. You...you wouldn't understand." Bloody hell, Ron himself didn't understand what was happening to him.

"Fair enough," Harry said with a shrug as he moved toward the door.

"Harry!" Ron blurted, knowing that what he was about to reveal was beyond insane but feeling like if he didn't tell someone he might burst.

"What?"

"Harry, I can't stand it!" And he really couldn't. Hermione was knocked up by him at home, all vulnerable and stuff, and here Ron couldn't get sodding *Romilda* out of his head. What the bloody fuck was wrong with him, anyway?

"You can't stand what?" Harry asked, the expression of bafflement on his face clearly giving way to concern; it wasn't lost on him that Ron had gone mental.

"I can't stop thinking about her!" he wailed miserably, desire and shame tenting his words in equal measure.

Harry stared at him a moment longer before saying neutrally, "Why does that stop you having breakfast?"

"I don't think she knows I exist," Ron confessed, feeling like he'd left his body altogether and was currently watching himself from the far side of the room, and he didn't recognize this stranger who had taken over his body.

"Blimey, Ron, we just had this discussion the night before last," Harry replied with an exasperated sigh, but the words made no sense to Ron. "She definitely knows you exist. She's having your twins, isn't she?"

Ron stared at him blankly, blinking in confusion: Romilda? Having his...? What the bloody...?
"Who are you talking about?"

"Who are *you* talking about?" Harry returned, gaping at him like he'd lost his bleedin' mind.

"Romilda Vane," he whispered with a contented sigh, seeing her pretty face in his head, her high cheekbones, her white teeth...

"This is a joke, right? You're joking."

"I think... Harry, I think I love her," Ron breathed, no longer doubting it or even trying to fight it as the words left his lips, unaware that he'd completely lost his grip on reality.

"Okay," Harry said, marching back over and stopping just in front of him. "Okay...say that again with a straight face."

"I love her," he repeated, more conviction in his voice. "Have you seen her hair, it's all black and shiny and silky...and her eyes? Her big, dark eyes? And her—"

"This is really funny and everything," Harry cut in, something like anger tingeing his voice, "but considering everything that's happened, it's not exactly in good taste, all right? Drop it."

Ron saw red at Harry's declaration that his feelings for Romilda were nothing more than a big joke; he reacted before he even realized what he was doing, pain that he barely registered exploding in his knuckles as his fist collided with the side of Harry's head, who'd turned once more to leave.

Unthinkingly, Ron drew his fist back a second time as Harry staggered, on the verge of delivering a second blow, but Harry was faster: With a quick flick of his wand, Ron found himself quite abruptly yanked into the air, dangling by his ankle as all the blood rushed to his head.

"What was that for?"

Harry bellowed at him.

"You insulted her, Harry! You said it was a joke!"

"This is insane! What's got into—?" Harry's voice abruptly halted, his eyes staring at something that Ron couldn't see. "Where did you get those Chocolate Cauldrons?"

"They were a birthday present!" Ron shouted, still feeling enraged as he revolved in the air, the pressure of the blood flooding to his brain making his head hurt. "I offered you one, didn't I?"

"You just picked them up off the floor, didn't you?"

"They'd fallen off my bed, all right? Let me go!"

"They didn't fall off your bed, you prat, don't you understand? They were mine, I chucked them out of my trunk when I was looking for the map, they're the Chocolate Cauldrons Romilda gave me before Christmas, and they're all spiked with love potion!"

Ron could only zoom in on one word of Harry's spiel: "Romilda? Did you say Romilda? Harry—do you know her? Can you introduce me?"

oOo

Mum was moving about the room, gathering up dirtied plates, glasses, and fish-and-chip wrappings from end tables, the remnants of their casual Saturday afternoon meal. Mum had never been one for cooking, really. Except on special occasions.

There was a comedy on the BBC, but Hermione didn't register a single word of it as she chuckled

along with her father at all of the seemingly appropriate moments: Her full attention was actually captivated by her letter from Ron, delivered by Pigwidgeon late yesterday afternoon and scribbled in Ron's familiar untidy scrawl: "*Hermione, I hope everything is going all right with you at your mum and dad's. I miss you. See you soon. —Ron.*"

Short, sweet, and to the point.

She released the breath that she hadn't realized that she'd been holding as she lay sprawled across the sofa, her socked feet crossed at the ankles and resting on the arm of the couch. She unfolded the letter for probably the fiftieth time since receiving it and traced Ron's words, which she'd memorized at the first read-through, of course, but that hadn't stopped her from reading them compulsively, again and again.

Ron.

She couldn't stop thinking about him and was, admittedly, rather annoyed by that fact. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw those blue eyes piercing hers as he hovered over her, seeking out something that she couldn't quite put a name to, his body weight pressing sweetly into her. How beautiful it had felt to touch him and to be touched by him, to feel wanted and loved—even if that beauty had been somewhat diminished by the necessity of the act, and fleeting indeed. Even if he hadn't felt as if he'd had a choice.

Even if he truly preferred someone else.

As Hermione refolded the letter along its worn creases, she realized that her hands were resting on her still-flat tummy. For a brief moment, she tried to picture how her stomach would look in a few months' time, rounded with Ron's unborn children, perhaps with stretch marks marring her now-smooth flesh. She attempted to envision the morning sickness that was sure to come, the inevitable weight gain and possible varicose veins; she had seen enough photos from her own mother's pregnancy to know that Jean Granger hadn't escaped the ravages of impending motherhood, and Hermione highly doubted that she would fare any better. Then she found herself frowning at her own selfish thoughts, reminding herself that, planned or not, expected or not, any amount of discomfort or disfigurements that she endured would be for the good of the tiny, precious lives that were currently in the process of implanting themselves in her womb.

Ron's unborn children, she thought to herself, even as she recalled the stabbing, nauseating ache that had accompanied the sight of Lavender in Ron's arms; that image was followed by a flash of Mrs. Weasley speaking to her in the hospital about faith as opposed to logic, and Ron's voice, gravelly and heartfelt, telling her that he loves her.

Which would she choose to believe? What her eyes had seen or what her heart was telling her? Was it possible that she'd been too hasty to retreat in her fragile state-of-mind, that she hadn't been witness to the whole picture, that if only she'd lingered, she might have—

Vomited on the floor, she reminded herself.

She was abruptly jerked out of her thoughts by a familiar scraping sound at the window. Before Mum or Dad had a chance to react, Hermione was on her feet, crossing the room and raising the blinds.

The moment she opened the window, she was met by Hedwig; Harry's snowy white owl swooped inside in a graceful arc, landing elegantly on Mum's curio cabinet. "What do you have for me, Hedwig?" Hermione murmured as she untied the rolled-up bit of parchment from the owl's outstretched foot.

Harry's letter was just as straightforward as Ron's had been: *"Hermione, Ron's been poisoned. Long story. He'll be all right, but he's asking for you. Please come. —Harry."*

Chapter 18: Proof Undeniable

Chapter Eighteen: Proof Undeniable

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Nineteen: Elf Tails.

oOo

Dinner was nearing completion on that typically rainy Saturday at the beginning of March when Hermione slunk quietly out of McGonagall's office and proceeded to march at a brisk, determined pace through the mostly deserted corridors. The large majority of Hogwarts students seemed to still be down in the Great Hall or else had retired to their common rooms, which she was grateful for, as the last thing that she desired was the unpleasant task of forced socialization. Therefore, she tucked her head down and picked up her pace while passing scattered handfuls of gossiping students dressed in casual weekend attire that littered the passageways—including one hot and heavy couple tucked into an alcove behind a suit of armor, hands invisible beneath each other's clothing.

They paid Hermione no mind as she passed, which suited her just fine. Ordinarily, she wouldn't have hesitated to scold the couple and to energetically deduct house points, but she'd never felt less inclined: Her own intimate experiences were all too fresh on her mind, and she felt the heat rising in her cheeks as she became aware of the dull ache that still lingered between her legs despite the potions she'd been given at the hospital. The ache that she didn't actually want to go away, because it was proof undeniable that it had all been *real*. That it had actually happened.

Her heart speeding up as she realized quite abruptly that she'd reached the closed double-doors to the infirmary, she took a calming breath, pushing the doors open just enough so that she could slip inside the semi-darkened hospital wing. Her heart seemed to stutter in her chest when she immediately caught sight of a small, all-too-familiar group of redheads, and the unmistakable head of black hair belonging to Harry, clustered around the single occupied bed.

A knot formed in the pit of her stomach as she caught a glimpse of his prone form in the gap between Fred and Ginny, and the only thing she could think was, *It's his birthday. He was poisoned on his birthday, and I wasn't here.*

Ron might have died, and Hermione hadn't been there.

Setting aside her anguish and regret for the time being with a sheer force of will, she made the decision then and there to trust her heart—to choose faith over logic and to trust that she'd somehow misinterpreted what she'd seen outside Trelawney's classroom.

And she realized, quite suddenly, that she'd known it all along.

This was it. She knew instinctively that there was no going back after this moment.

In the next instant, she became aware that Harry had broken away from the small group that consisted of Fred, George, and Ginny, and was striding toward her: "Hermione," he greeted quietly as he met her halfway, surprising her by embracing her briefly, if somewhat uncomfortably, before breaking away and taking a step back. "How are you?" he asked hesitantly, searching her face in a telltale manner that left no doubt in her mind, especially when his eyes flashed to her midriff; his gaze didn't linger but a fraction of a second, but it was enough: He knew

—of that she was absolutely certain. Of course Ron had told him. Why wouldn't he have? Harry was his best friend as well.

"How is he, Harry?" she whispered, ignoring his question and the hot flush of her own face, her concern for Ron's wellbeing taking precedence over any trivial embarrassment on her part.

"Good. Better. He's been conscious on and off." He paused momentarily, an awkward expression settling on his familiar features. "He's been...sorta...calling for you, mumbling your name."

"It's quite disgusting, really," added Ginny with a gentle teasing smile as she sidled up to them, embracing Hermione briefly as well and giving the older girl the impression that Ginny, too, knew her secret. Their eyes met momentarily, and Ron's only sister seemed to be silently saying, *We'll talk about it later.*

Once again putting any mortification on the backburner, Hermione brushed past Harry and Ginny and drifted forward as if in a trance, her throat suddenly very dry and aching with the considerable effort it took not to start crying; she barely registered Fred and George as they parted to give her room, because she couldn't tear her eyes from the youngest Weasley brother: He was pale, almost deathly so, the contrast of which served to further emphasize the freckles on his face. He was breathing shallowly, as if every breath was a struggle, and his familiar, full lips were slightly parted—lips that she remembered, with a pang of sudden, sharp clarity, on her body, passionately driving her to the pinnacle of pleasure...

She closed her eyes tight against the memory, forcing back the tears.

She wanted to kiss him. She wanted to fall to her knees and sob on his chest, neither action of which would be appropriate or dignified given present company.

"What happened?" she breathed to no one in particular, only vaguely aware that Ginny and Harry had followed her back over to Ron's bedside, swallowing back the sob that threatened to work its way up in her throat. She would *not* fall apart. Acting the part of some silly, weepy damsel in distress wouldn't benefit Ron in any way.

Harry was the one to answer from across the hospital bed, recounting a story about Ron and a mishap with a love potion early that morning, followed by his encounter with some poisoned mead in Professor Slughorn's office not minutes later.

"...and then I got the bezoar down his throat and his breathing eased up a bit," Harry was saying. "Slughorn ran for help, McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey turned up, and they brought Ron up here. They reckon he'll be all right. Madam Pomfrey says he'll have to stay here a week or so... keep taking essence of rue..."

"Blimey, it was lucky you thought of a bezoar," George spoke up, his tone uncharacteristically sober; Hermione supposed that their brother's near-death experience was enough to tone even the twins down a bit.

"Lucky there was one in the room," Harry replied just as soberly, his eyes trained on Ron's face.

Hermione bit her lower lip and clenched her jaw tight, barely suppressing a sniff as the tears threatened to break free once more. She reached out a trembling hand, pressing her fingers to the top of Ron's arm... She wanted to take his hand, but she restrained herself out of fear of...well, she wasn't certain of what, exactly. Surely Fred and George wouldn't feel inclined to tease her, and even if they did, so what? With her resolve steeled, she took the unoccupied chair nearest his bedside and intertwined her fingers with Ron's on top of the thin sheet; his hand twitch ever so slightly beneath hers, and she allowed herself the indulgence of believing that it had been in

response to her touch.

"Do Mum and Dad know?" she heard George—no, Fred—inquire behind her.

"They've already seen him," Ginny answered. "They arrived an hour ago—they're in Dumbledore's office now, but they'll be back soon..."

Hermione stiffened uncomfortably, even as she squeezed Ron's hand reassuringly in response to his incoherent mumblings: What exactly, if anything, did the others know about her and Ron's situation? Surely Ginny and Harry, at least, knew that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had been summoned to the school when Hermione had been hospitalized in St. Mungo's, but had they been told the whole truth? Or, if they indeed knew of her pregnancy as she suspected, did they believe that she and Ron had been having an affair?

"So the poison was in the drink?" Fred asked quietly, steering Hermione's thoughts abruptly back on track: *Oh, honestly*, she chided herself. In light of the fact that Ron could very realistically have *died*, did it matter what anyone thought?

"Yes," Harry responded immediately. "Slughorn poured it out—"

"Would he have been able to slip something into Ron's glass without you seeing?" Fred cut in quickly, and Hermione found herself listening to their exchange intently, just as eager as the others to get to the bottom of the mystery.

"Probably," Harry said, a slight frown in his voice, "but why would Slughorn want to poison Ron?"

"No idea. You don't think he could have mixed up the glasses by mistake? Meaning to get you?"

"Why would Slughorn want to poison Harry?" Ginny piped up.

"I dunno," Fred answered slowly, "but there must be loads of people who'd like to poison Harry, mustn't there? 'The Chosen One' and all that?"

"So you think Slughorn's a Death Eater?" Ginny asked, a skeptical edge to her tone.

"Anything's possible," Fred answered darkly.

"He could be under the Imperius Curse," suggested George after a moment.

"Or, if anything's possible," Ginny replied thoughtfully, "maybe it wasn't intended for Harry at all. Maybe it actually *was* meant for Ron. What do we really know about what Lavender Brown is capable of? Maybe Ron publicly chucking her like that sent her around the twist."

Hermione's head snapped around to stare at the younger girl, her mind processing what she'd just heard.

Ginny favored her with a sort of apologetic grimace: "Sorry, Hermione, I thought you knew, it's all over the school, and you were here at least part of that morning: Apparently Ron waited around outside of Divination to break up with her. I heard she took it well, but after..."

Hermione's heart raced as she took this in, and in a microsecond she'd pieced together what she had—or hadn't, as was the case—seen: Ron pacing back and forth beneath the trapdoor leading up to Trelawney's room, nervously rehearsing what he was going to say to her, eager to prove to her, Hermione, that he was serious; then the class is filing down the ladder, and, when Lavender lays eyes on what she assumes to be her loyal boyfriend who'd come to walk her to her next class,

she squeals and throws herself into his arms, her lips gluing themselves to his before he has a chance to push her away, and he's momentarily stunned into inaction...

That was the exact moment that Hermione had approached the scene, eager to seek out Ron, not knowing that he was just as eagerly attempting to break up with Lavender Brown.

She really had immaculate timing, didn't she?

Hermione felt disgusted with herself that she hadn't considered this scenario from the beginning, that she'd so readily believed what her eyes had told her—yet there was a part of her that had come to *expect* Ron to hurt her, whether intentionally or not, and, she realized, she hadn't quite been ready to fully trust him.

"But after what?" she asked abruptly, focusing on the fact that there had been something else that Ginny had clearly wanted to say, but the younger girl had hesitated.

Ginny glanced between Fred and George, who were watching the two girls curiously, but before their sister could speak again, Ron, quite unexpectedly, croaked, "Er-my-nee."

Five sets of eyes turned to peer down at him eagerly, and Hermione squeezed his hand: "I'm here," she reassured him gently, but all he did was stir a bit in his sleep, mutter something incoherently, and resume his snoring.

"Hermione, can I talk to you for a minute?" Ginny asked suddenly, her eyes briefly meeting Harry's, something unspoken passing between them, and he nodded almost imperceptibly in response to whatever that unspoken something was.

Wordlessly, Hermione extricated her hand from Ron's, and the two girls crossed to the far end of the long aisle, stopping several beds down from Madam Pomfrey's office at the end of the room. Hermione glanced back toward Ron's bed and saw that Harry, Fred, and George had resumed their discussion, undoubtedly speculating on conspiracy theories and the identity of the would-be assassin.

"I was going to say," Ginny began slowly, "that after word got out about you and Ron and...and your situation"—her eyes flashed toward Hermione's abdomen—"that maybe she lost it."

Hermione felt the color drain from her face. "How—how did word get out?" she managed to ask in a surprisingly steady voice.

"Ron told Harry in the locker room after Quidditch practice, and...well, that stupid tart Romilda Vane overheard. You can imagine how quickly it spread after that. Anyway, I promise I didn't know anything before then; all I knew was that *something* was up, obviously, but Mum and Dad wouldn't tell me what, they just said it was up to you and Ron to tell everyone when you were ready, but then I heard the rumors, and when I confronted Ron he told me the truth...

the *whole* truth." She paused for a moment, clearly attempting to gauge Hermione's reaction. "I tried to stop the rumors, Hermione," she said quickly. "Really, I did, I told Romilda I'd tell Harry that she'd shagged half the boys in the school if she didn't tell everyone that she was a dirty liar, and I think I might've actually scared her, too, 'cause she turned a really unflattering shade of green, but it was too late... The damage was done, and I was with Ron last night when Lavender came up to him, acting all mental, steam practically coming out o'her ears—"

"It wasn't Lavender," Hermione said, the words falling from her lips almost of their own accord. "Lavender Brown may be a lot of things, annoying and overbearing among them, but she wouldn't poison anyone, no matter how deserving."

Ginny nodded, accepting Hermione's word at face value. "All right, that's good enough for me." She paused again, that thoughtful expression on her face once more: "Although, I still think Ron might've been the intended target. I mean, it's quite a coincidence, doncha think? That thing with you and the potion—anyone with half a brain can see that he's into you—and now Ron and the mead... Maybe someone's got it out for him."

"Maybe," Hermione said slowly, feeling somewhat amused, despite the seriousness of the situation, over Ginny's declaration that "anyone with half a brain" could see that Ron had feelings for Hermione, when Hermione herself hadn't been sure until very recently. "But that would require a lot of forethought, wouldn't it? The perpetrator would've had to leave a lot to chance, wouldn't they? For instance, not only would they've had to know that Ron and I would end up in detention together, but also that I'd somehow manage to get that potion into my bloodstream. Additionally, they would've had to count not only on Ron being sent to Professor Slughorn this morning, but also on Professor Slughorn giving him the mead. The idea that it was all orchestrated seems a bit farfetched, when you think about it."

Ginny gave Hermione a look that was partly disgruntled but mostly amused: "Well, it was just an idea. You're the one with the brains, right?" Her expression grew serious in the next instant, something greatly resembling guilt in her eyes as she said, "Hermione, there's something else I need to tell you, something I should've told you a long time ago, about a row I had with Ron before he got together with Lavender..."

oOo

It was more than an hour later that she finally got the opportunity to cry.

Having entrusted Ron to his family's care, Hermione snuck off to find the nearest loo, which was thankfully abandoned this late in the evening. Warding it against unwanted intruders, she then sank to the floor of the first stall and cried herself raw.

She released all of her conflicting, pent-up emotions: all of the guilt, the sorrow, the relief, the joy, and even the anger at learning that Ginny had inadvertently sabotaged her chances of having a relationship with Ron sooner and thereby allowing them to bypass the whole Lavender hurdle—but it no longer mattered. It hadn't really been Ginny's fault at all; Ron had made his own poor decisions, and Hermione had made hers. And that was that. It was over and done, and these were the facts that she was left with:

1. Ron had broken up with Lavender to be with her, Hermione. He loved her. Of that, she harbored no lingering doubts.
2. Ron was alive. He was going to be fine.
3. She was having his twins.

Hermione had thought that she had already come to terms with that last fact, but it wasn't until Madam Pomfrey had examined her minutes prior and confirmed that two healthy, fully-formed embryos had successfully implanted themselves in the lining of her uterus that it had really, truly hit her: She was going to be a mother.

4. The whole school was talking about it. She was likely being called a slag, a tart, and every other derogatory name in the book, but she found that she couldn't even bring herself to care too much, because it was completely inconsequential compared with the first three facts.

Let them talk, she decided once she was completely cried-out—and feeling much better for it.

Hermione Granger had never before cared what people thought about her, and she wasn't about to start.

5. According to Hagrid, the board of governors would be talking about shutting down the school for good, due to the sequential incidents of Katie with the necklace, Hermione with the potion, and now Ron with the mead.

She couldn't adequately explain why, but she had a sneaking suspicion that while her own incident had merely been an accident, the other two, Ron's and Katie's, were related.

6. Also according to Hagrid, Professor Snape had been asked by Professor Dumbledore to investigate Slytherin House.

oOo

It was late when Ron's arm shifted beneath her head.

She sat up immediately, a crick in her neck due to the awkward position in which she'd been sleeping in the chair, her head nestled against his arm at the edge of his bed, but it was no matter: She was instantly alert, her eyes seeking his face eagerly in the dim lighting of the solitary, flickering candle at his bedside table.

How long he'd been awake, she had no idea, but his blue eyes were clearly open, the flame from the candle dancing and flickering in his irises.

He smiled. "Hi." His voice was quite gravelly, but it was the most beautiful sound in the world to Hermione. "You're really here. I thought I'd dreamed you."

Chapter 19: Merlin's Sweet Pants

Chapter Nineteen: Merlin's Sweet Pants

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Nineteen: Elf Tails.

oOo

Ron groaned as he gradually slipped back into consciousness, his body feeling like it'd been stampeded by a pack of angry Centaurs. He slowly became aware of his arms and legs, his fingers and toes, and of the fact that he was lying on a fairly soft surface, and there was a gentle pressure against his right forearm.

And then there was the feeling in his head like someone had ripped open his skull and shoved razor blades into his brain. What the bloody hell had happened to him, anyway?

No sooner had that thought crossed his mind than the memories began to seep into his muddled mind, but they were more like shattered remnants of half-remembered dreams than actual memories: devouring those chocolates, the way he hadn't been able to get Romilda—Really? Sodding *Romilda Vane*?—out of his head, declaring his *love* for that little harpy...

Oh, fucking Merlin.

He groaned again but for entirely different reasons than before, feeling like he'd just awakened from a horrific nightmare as he recalled the rest: following Harry to Slughorn's office like some sorta love-crazed lunatic, being given a tonic "for the nerves," as the Potions instructor had said, followed for a crushing moment of reality just before—

He'd been poisoned. Through a haze of nonsensical dreams and broken bouts of consciousness, he seemed to remember Harry and Ginny, McGonagall and others, Fred and George, and... Hermione?...talking about him being poisoned...unless he'd dreamed that, too? He had no foggy idea what was real and what wasn't.

At the thought of Hermione, he forced his eyes open, confused at first about his shadowy surroundings, but by the light of a flickering candle on the table at his bedside, he recognized the shapes of other beds and various medical equipment shoved against the walls: Of course. He was in the familiar hospital wing at Hogwarts.

Thank Merlin he wasn't at St. Mungo's.

The sound of a light snore very near his right side had his head whipping in that direction: He would've recognized that unruly mess of dark curls anywhere, even if he didn't have a view of her delicate, pretty profile. Her mouth was slightly open, a bit of drool leaking onto his arm, and he wanted to laugh—not because it was funny—well, not completely, anyway—but because he was practically leaping for joy on the inside.

Even as he wanted to jump up with giddy excitement and shout like a bloody idiot, "She's here! She came!"; even as he wanted to pinch himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming, he couldn't help but think, *Hermione snores*. It was cute, actually, from her. Endearing.

Not that he wouldn't tease her about it, though, 'cause he would—you could bet your bollocks he would.

He studied her by the candlelight for several moments, his eyes drinking her up like a man dying of thirst as he wondered how long she'd been here and why she'd come. Well, obviously someone had told her about his little mishap, but did she come out of obligation? Pity? Or just because she wanted to? Because she loved him? (He dared to hope.)

When he realized abruptly that her head was cutting off his circulation and that he couldn't feel his fingers, he shifted gingerly, attempting to free his arm without waking her—and he almost managed it.

The moment his arm was settled on top of the thin hospital sheet, Hermione suddenly shot up like someone had hexed her in her sleep, her hair all wild and crazy around her head, her large, brown eyes widening as they met his own gaze.

Ron was briefly taken aback by how fucking pretty she was, like he'd never truly seen her before.

He attempted a smile, wondering—he wasn't sure why—whether she'd hex him. For some reason he thought she might. He was sure he deserved it, even if his biggest crime had been to get her pregnant. "Hi," he said, and before he could stop himself he added, "You're really here. I thought I'd dreamed you." At least he hadn't been so corny as to tell her he'd thought she was a Veela. Well, that was the effect she was having on him, anyway. He felt like he might jump up and try to juggle the hospital beds if he thought it might impress her.

Or do homework. Yeah, watching him do homework might get her rocks off.

"Hi," she returned, and then she bit her lip almost shyly as she glanced away from him, and it occurred to Ron at that moment that this was the first time they'd been alone together since...well, since they'd... Yeah.

He felt his ears warm, but luckily it was too dark for her to notice as she suddenly sprang to her feet. "Oh! Do you need anything? You must be parched!—Here, let me help—I'll just get—"

"Hermione—"

"—Madam Pomfrey—"

"*Hermione*, I'm okay, just...stop for a minute, all right? Let's just...I dunno...talk." He ignored the fact that he had a splitting headache; it could wait.

"Oh—well—talk—okay." Slowly, she sank back into the chair, her hands clasped together almost nervously, her eyes somewhere over Ron's shoulder as he cautiously sat up in bed and turned to face her.

There was a lingering, awkward silence, and Ron knew that he had to speak, to say something to get the ball rolling, and he figured he should probably start with something basic, something honest: "I'm sorry," he said quickly, slightly surprised when he realized that she'd blurted the same words at the exact same moment.

They stared at each other for a stunned moment, and he couldn't help but burst into laughter at how ridiculous they were being; they were acting like they'd never bloody talked before or been alone together. When Hermione joined in, it only served to fuel Ron's own hilarity, and it was several minutes before either had calmed enough to speak again.

"We're being silly, aren't we?" Hermione said around a giggle, wiping a tear from her eye. "It's still us, isn't it?"

"Sure," he replied with a gentle smile. "The same old Ron and Hermione." But were they the same, really? After everything that had happened?

"What if I go first?" Hermione suggested as she shifted in her chair, pulling her feet up into the seat and wrapping her arms around her knees. "I made mistakes," she admitted when Ron nodded at her to go on. "I reacted...poorly to your choice to...to be with Lavender—"

"Hermione, I—"

"Please just let me get this out, Ron. Then you can say anything that you'd like."

"All right," he whispered, then waited for her to continue.

"It was wrong of me—actually, it was quite horrid of me—to attack you. Twice. Admittedly, my temper isn't one of my better personality traits." She paused, and Ron had to force himself not to cringe at the nightmarish memory of Hermione walking in on him that single time Lavender had gone down on him. "Anyway," she continued, clearly having been reliving that moment as well, "it was wrong of me to use Cormac to try to make you jealous, and it was wrong of me to behave so immaturely toward you, and perhaps even a tad hypocritical. Yes, I was hurt, but...I know why you went out with her, Ron. She's a pretty girl who was nice to you; she made you feel clever and attractive."

She seemed to hesitate before adding, "It's the same reason I went out with Viktor, actually—because I was flattered by the attention, but I guess I already said that back in Filch's office." As Ron took that in, she was already moving on: "Anyway, maybe I could've been nicer to you as well, complimented you on occasion. I should have told you what I was really thinking, like the fact that I think you're clever and very handsome and an amazing athlete."

Even by the light of the single candle, he could see that she was blushing—and so was he, for that matter, but he couldn't deny that he was bloody thrilled by her words, if a bit dumbfounded. "Sure you're not getting me and Harry mixed up?" he asked, only partly joking: *Him?* Ron Weasley? Clever, handsome, and an athlete? Surely she was either off her rocker or was taking the piss...

"Believe me—I'm not talking bout Harry," she said firmly, and her voice was so certain that Ron couldn't *not* believe her even if he wanted to. "If I'd made my intentions, and my feelings, a bit clearer from the onset, maybe we could've avoided that whole mess of a situation." She paused again, licking her lips before adding, "And I'm sorry about leaving like that the other day, after I found out about the...the pregnancy."

Ron's stomach did that odd flippy thing at hearing her talk about the fact that she was pregnant by him, but she plowed on, oblivious:

"...I was confused, unsure, scared and...then I saw you with Lavender outside of Divination. I was only there for a second, but I saw...I saw her kissing you—and I know now that you pushed her away, that you were breaking up with her, but I didn't trust you, and I'm sorry for that."

She leaned back then, seeming lost in thought, and Ron got the impression that she was done.

"Hermione, I haven't exactly given you much of a reason to trust me," he admitted slowly after he'd absorbed everything that she'd said, considering his words carefully before speaking. "Here you are, bloody apologizing to *me* when, let's face it, I was the world's biggest arse." He sighed in frustration while shifting on the bed, facing her more fully in a cross-legged position as he grasped for the words that would best get his point across:

"I mean, bloody hell, Hermione, you actually took a risk by asking me out—which is a helluva lot

more than what I ever did. I just sorta wallowed around like a bleedin' coward, thinking you pitied me and would never wanna be with a bloke like me. And I went out with Lavender 'cause I was a hormonal git, just like you said in Filch's office, and, yeah, I guess she made me feel good... complimenting me and stuff. And, all right, so I was confused about you, about my feelings for you, and everything was just so complicated, and Lavender, well..."

"Not so complicated," Hermione interjected, the corners of her lips quirking up ever-so-slightly. "I get that. Honestly, Ron, it's over and done—"

"But I should've stopped!" he blurted, feeling the urgent need to get everything out in the open, no matter how unpleasant, no matter how bad it made him look. "Blimey, after the birds it became pretty sodding clear what I was doing to you, and even though I felt guilty about it, I was also... happy that I was making you jealous. I bloody wanted you to feel as jealous about Lavender as I'd felt about Krum, and I know it was wrong, and you didn't deserve it, but I couldn't seem to help myself—and, fucking hell, I *used* her, and I'm not proud of that, Hermione. I was raised better than that, but I did it anyway."

When she did nothing more than bite her lip and raise her eyebrows, he thought it best to amend his last statements: "But I didn't—I mean, *we* didn't—what you saw was—bloody hell, Hermione, I didn't...I didn't sleep with her, all right? I just...want you to know that. Yeah, I was a pig, but I didn't—I wouldn't let her—"

"Ron, it's okay," she said soothingly, placing her hand on his arm, and Ron stared down at the place where she touched him, feeling her heat scorch his skin. "I believe you, and it's all right. You made mistakes, and you learned from them—that's the important thing, isn't it? That we learn from our mistakes?"

He sighed in relief as he nodded, feeling placated that she wasn't planning on holding his bad judgment against him. He *really* didn't deserve a witch like Hermione; she was just so good and pure and brave and just...fucking brilliant. Not to mention that she had a fantastic arse, but that was just an added bonus.

"I don't really wanna talk about Lavender anymore but...I'm gonna tell her I'm sorry about everything. She'll probably just slap me again, but she didn't deserve..." He felt his eyes widen in horror as something else occurred to him, something important that had completely slipped his mind. "Hermione, there's something you need to know: I might've..." He scrubbed the back of his neck absently with one hand, avoiding her steady gaze, as he blurted, "I sorta told Harry about us....about what happened with the potion—"

"I already know, Ron," she assured him quickly. "I know that you told Harry and that Romilda was eavesdropping in on the conversation. Ginny filled me in on everything."

"And...you're okay with that?" he asked slowly, thinking that she was entirely too calm, given that everyone in the school was bloody talking about her.

She shrugged. "I'm not ashamed of being with you, if that's what you mean. No, admittedly, I'm not exactly thrilled to be the focus of the student body's latest gossip, but luckily it seems to have a short attention span; they'll be talking about something else in a week. And, honestly, we couldn't have kept it a secret when I start to show in a couple of months anyway, so think of it as getting the brunt of the gossip over with."

His heart swelled so large that he thought it might burst at her declaration that she wasn't ashamed of being with him—and at her implication that they were, in fact, "together." After her impromptu departure, Ron had been too scared to hope. "That's a good way of looking at it."

"Besides, we have bigger things to worry about," she added seriously. "Hagrid says they'll be thinking about shutting down the school for good—"

"Bollocks! Not while Dumbledore—"

Her large eyes were quite somber as she said, "I don't know, Ron, it's looking quite serious—first Katie, then me, now you... Apparently the Heads of Houses are being asked to perform internal investigations. It doesn't look good. Also, I'm not sure about Katie's parents—although I can imagine—but mine were livid—at least, they were as angry as I've ever known them to be. They attempted to hide it for my sake, of course, but I could tell—"

"Your parents!" Ron blurted, feeling terrible that she'd had to face that alone—but at the same time immensely relieved that he'd gotten out of it, he admitted to himself. No matter how much his dad liked Mr. Granger, Ron couldn't imagine the bloke was thrilled about his baby girl being knocked up, no matter who did the "knocking" and under what circumstances. "I should've been there."

"Trust me, it was best that it was just me," Hermione assured him, "although, it would probably be prudent of you to come to my house soon and get to know them a bit better—maybe over Easter. You *are* the father of their unborn grandchildren, after all."

Ron felt a bit ill at the idea of having to face the Grangers so soon, but he reckoned he might as well get it over with. "Yeah, all right," he said, the words coming out embarrassingly high-pitched. "If you think so." Forget spiders; Hermione's dad was now his worst fear.

"I do. Also, Mum mentioned wanting all of us to get together with your parents soon, perhaps over brunch, but, come to think of it, it might have to wait until summer, since it's already March and term will be ending soon..." Her voice trailed off, and Hermione looked horrified all of a sudden. "I didn't get you anything for your birthday!" she suddenly wailed, startling him. "Oh, Ron, I didn't even think about it until I arrived at the hospital earlier... I'm horrible...absolutely horrible!"

He grinned at her and, feeling emboldened, turned his hand over and intertwined his fingers in hers. "Hey, you *did* get me a birthday present, remember?" he soothed, knowing that he was one corny sonuvabitch for what he was about to say, but he'd risk sounding like a tit if it made her feel better. 'Sides, they were being honest with each other now, right?

When her eyebrows knitted together in confusion, he cocked his head in her direction. "You're carrying my twins, aren't you? What else do I need?"

She stared at him momentarily, her eyes widening in comprehension, and then she blushed again, biting her lip in that nervous/shy way that he'd always found so fucking adorable. "Yes, I suppose I am," she said after a moment, a wide grin abruptly cracking her face. "Madam Pomfrey confirmed a few hours ago."

Ron's grin mirrored her own, and he reached out to pull her other hand into his lap, gripping both her hands in his. "Really?"

"Really," she confirmed, her smile widening impossibly. "I know that I shouldn't be so happy about this," she confessed in a timid but excited voice. "I'm seventeen, for crying out loud. Our world is in turmoil, and everything's so uncertain. But I am, Ron. I gave it a fair amount of thought over the weekend and...I realized that I'm happy. I really, truly am."

Ron's own giddiness was dampened a bit by her mentioning Voldemort's return, but he allowed her infectious enthusiasm to wipe any worry from his mind for now.

Fuck Voldemort. Fuck the Death Eaters. Hermione was happy—that's what mattered to Ron. She was happy about being pregnant. By *him*.

Oh, fucking hell.

He wanted to celebrate. He wanted to do something, anything... He wanted to pull her into his arms, to snog her senseless, but he hesitated to do so, her rejection the *last* time he'd attempted to kiss her still all too fresh on his mind. "So...does that mean we're friends again?" he asked her instead, gracing her with a teasing lopsided grin.

"Definitely," she whispered, a bit breathless as her head seemed to tilt toward his just a bit, something like...longing?...in her eyes. "More than friends, I'd hope." Her chocolate-colored eyes fell to his lips then, and she licked her own, the tip of her pink tongue darting out for the briefest of moments before disappearing once more.

Ron swallowed hard in nervous anticipation; he could literally hear his heart pounding against his ribs. "Oh, yeah?" he said, attempting to stifle the anxious quiver in his voice and to calm his racing pulse. "Hey, what was that you were saying before about me being handsome? And athletic...or whatever it was?"

She grinned at that, but then her face grew unexpectedly serious, and she looked just as nervous as he felt, her chest inflating and deflating noticeably, her breath escaping her lips in shallow little puffs. "Ron?"

"Yeah?" he whispered, so quietly that he would've been surprised if she'd actually heard him. He was frozen, forgetting to breathe as Hermione leaned up in her chair, craning her neck to bridge the gap between them. He leaned down instinctively, drawn to her like a moth to the flame as his legs unfurled themselves, and she was suddenly between his thighs.

"I love you, too. It's always been you."

Merlin's. Sweet. Pants.

Ron wasn't sure when or how it had happened, but the next thing he knew her silky lips were gliding tentatively against his, and she was soft—*so fucking soft*—as she kissed him ever so sweetly, her hands sliding up his chest and around his neck, her fingers threading in his hair. He returned her kiss almost frantically, wanting more, feeling like he'd been starving for her his entire life and hadn't even realized how desperately hungry he'd been until he'd gotten this small taste...

His hands slipped from her hips, his arms enfolding her slender waist and pulling her flush against his body, and while he'd be lying if he said he wasn't ridiculously turned on—he wouldn't be able to hide that fact from her even if he bloody wanted to—this wasn't about sex or physical gratification.

This was about the fact that he was finally, *finally* kissing Hermione. His Hermione. And she was kissing him back with enthusiasm. And she loved him. She bloody *loved* him. And it was all so much sweeter than he could've ever imagined.

I'm the hero of this story, he realized in amazement. *I actually got the girl.*

Nothing could've prepared him for the staggering feelings of unadulterated love and wonder that seemed to course through every fiber of his being at that thought—Merlin, he really was a tit, wasn't he?—but he didn't give a rat's fart. He got the girl, and not just any girl, but *Hermione*, and she was parting her lips for him almost shyly, beckoning him, and who was Ron Weasley to deny such a polite invite?

He delved his tongue inside her mouth—she tasted like spearmint toothpaste and something distinctly, deliciously Hermione—probing, exploring; he boldly sucked her tongue, eliciting a throaty shuddering moan from her that traveled straight to his throbbing groin, which was currently grinding against her hip of its own accord.

Their lips broke apart in the next instant, and they were both left gasping for air as Ron tried desperately to calm himself physically. It was only when he attempted to put a bit of distance between their bodies—blimey, he didn't want her thinking that all he wanted from her was sex—that he realized that she was now sitting in his lap. How the blazes had that happened?

He peered down at her in the semi-darkness, admiring her lips that were red and swollen from their snogging, her eyes that were heavily-lidded from what he hoped was lust, and her cheeks that were flushed prettily. Merlin, she was fuck-hot. How could she not see what he saw when she looked in the mirror?

Unable to resist, he leaned down and kissed her once more on her plump lips, quietly assuring her that nothing was wrong, that he just needed to calm down—and she seemed to understand, because she merely smiled and scooted off of his lap. Moving to the far edge of the small bed, Ron stretched out on his side and wordlessly reached for her. Hermione complied unhesitatingly, lying down with him and snuggling against his chest with a contented sigh.

His heart felt like it might literally burst with joy as he brought up a hand, entangling his fingers in the luscious silk of her hair. It felt so fucking good just to have her lie with him like this.

"That was nice," she whispered into the silence of the hospital dormitory after a moment. "For a first kiss."

He snorted in amused incredulity. "Nice? I thought it was bloody brilliant—for *any* kiss."

She merely smiled at that as she glanced up at him, an adorably satisfied expression on her face.

"Hey, I'd've snogged you years ago if I'd known it'd make you smile like you just made Head Girl."

Hermione laughed as she propped herself up on her elbow, regarding him in the still-flickering candlelight. "Ron, are you all right, really? When I heard that you were poisoned..." She shook her head, closing her eyes briefly, and the idea that he'd managed to scare her—even if he couldn't help having been poisoned—made him feel guilty.

"I'm fine, 'Ermione," he murmured, noting the troubled expression on her face and wanting more than anything to make it go away. "Okay, I'll admit it—Up until about five minutes ago, I had a splitting headache, but it turns out that all it takes is a good snogging session with Hermione Granger to cure that right up. Who'd've thought? Maybe Fred and George could turn a profit off o'that."

"Oh, honestly," she admonished around a grudging smile. "Do you need anything? Maybe I should get—"

"Really, Hermione, I'm fine," he soothed her, his hand disentangling from her hair to absently run over the smooth flesh of her arm. "Honestly. Just a bit tired. And damned hungry. But I don't reckon I'll starve before morning."

"Oh, all right. If you're sure..."

"Yeah, at least, I don't *think* I'll starve," he teased, placing a kiss against the top of her messy head.

"Hmm...I don't know... That one time you missed dinner because I made you do your homework before prefect rounds, I didn't think I'd hear the end of it."

He let out a low chuckle at that. "Now you're just exaggerating."

"I assure you, I'm not."

A comfortable silence descended on them then, and they both became lost in their own thoughts, mulling over everything that had passed between them.

"Hey, Hermione?" he said after a moment, something occurring to him.

"Yes, Ron?"

"Why are you here?"

"What do you mean?" A small frown puckered her forehead. "Harry owled that you'd been poisoned, so of course I came."

"What I mean is—and it's not that I wasn't bloody thrilled to wake up to your pretty face and your cute little snores—"

"I most certainly do not sn—"

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about, Hermione, but back to what I was asking before I was so rudely interrupted—where are my mum and dad? I'm surprised Mum didn't throw a fit about staying the night..."

"Oh." She seemed a bit flustered, clearly still huffed up about him saying that she snored, and he had to force himself not to grin like an idiot: She was bloody cute when she was all worked up like that. "Well—er—Madam Pomfrey told your family that she would allow you to have one overnight guest tonight, and, well, your mum insisted that it should be me—if I wanted to—and I did—of course. She told me to tell you that she'd be back first thing in the morning."

"Really." How 'bout that.

He had a sudden hunch that his mum had already started planning their wedding in her head.

As much as he loved Hermione and he had no doubt in his mind that he wanted to marry her—and he hoped she wanted the same thing, at least eventually—Ron realized suddenly that he wanted to take things a bit more slowly with her.

Bloody hell, they'd gone from not even speaking to being forced to shag to imminent parenthood. It wasn't exactly how he'd pictured it when he'd thought of getting with Hermione—not that he was complaining, 'cause if the thing with the potion hadn't happened he shuddered to think that he'd probably still be with Lavender, and Hermione would still hate him.

But maybe they could just...slow down a bit? Start over? "Hermione, would you go out with me?" Okay, so he'd blurted that out without really thinking it through...

She peered at him curiously from where she was propped up on her elbow, tucked into his side. "You mean like on a date?"

"Er—yeah—I mean...only if you want to..." Brilliant. He was stammering nonsensically. Real smooth. "What I mean is," he said slowly, deciding it best to start over, "is that I know we already...y'know...did...it..." His ears burned hotly, and he watched Hermione bite her lip, her

own face going pink. Fucking hell, if Fred and George were here they'd be laughing their arses off at his complete lack of finesse.

He groaned in embarrassed frustration, wanting to kick himself as he scrubbed his unshaven face with both hands and let out a string of curses under his breath.

"Ron?" Hermione said gently, her small, warm hands coming up to ply his from his face. "I think I understand what you're saying, and that would be fine with me. More than fine, in fact."

"It—it would?" How the hell did she know what he'd been trying to say? *He* didn't even know what he'd been trying to say.

"Yes," she said earnestly. "I think it would be good for us to take things slowly, to ease into a relationship. Just because we were forced to...to have intimate relations much sooner than we would have under normal circumstances doesn't mean that we should just...jump into things we're not actually ready for, right?"

"Right," Ron said slowly, partially beginning to regret even bringing this up. "When you say 'slowly,' exactly how slowly are we talking about here?"

"Oh, you are hopeless, Ron Weasley," she said with a laugh, swatting his arm.

"Hey, now," he mock-protested, rubbing his arm, "I'm injured, remember? 'Sides, you just said not fifteen minutes ago that your violent streak isn't one of your better qualities."

"So what *is* one of my better qualities, then?" she asked, a mischievous glint in her eye, and Ron was flabbergasted to realize that Hermione was actually *flirting* with him. *His* Hermione. Flirting.

"Snogging. Definitely."

She laughed again, but before she could land another blow, he had her arms pinned over her head as he leaned into her and snogged her senseless against the mattress. This kiss was decidedly more playful than before, and Hermione seemed more sure of herself as she arched into him, her tongue seeking his and, bloody hell, if he wasn't already hard as a rock again...

"Definitely snogging," he breathed as he lifted his lips from hers and released her wrists. Once her hands were freed, she reached up, stroking his scratchy face fondly, stifling a yawn as she did so. "We should get some sleep," he whispered, placing a kiss against the tip of her nose, and she smiled lazily in response, turning in his arms and nestling her bum against his pelvis—which didn't help his erection. Not one bloody bit.

He pulled his hips back several inches as his arm came around to cradle her tiny waist; he splayed his hand over her flat belly just beneath her t-shirt, marveling at the idea that two lives—two tiny lives that they'd created together—were, even now, growing inside her, evolving and developing.

"Ron?" Hermione whispered, clearly already on the verge of sleep. "I do *not* snore."

And then she was snoring.

Chapter 20: Ron Weasley, The Virile One

Chapter Twenty: Ron Weasley, the Virile One

oOo

This chapter is set between HBP Chapter Twenty: Lord Voldemort's Request and Chapter Twenty-One: The Unknowable Room.

oOo

"Here, Ron, let me do it before you burn a hole in your jeans." Caught between amusement and exasperation, Hermione took the wand from his fumbling hands, which had been fidgety the entire journey to King's Cross Station, before kneeling down and lengthening the hems of his trousers, watching as the worn cotton elongated and stretched until it covered up the tops of his socks.

"There," she said in satisfaction as she straightened once more and handed him his wand back, all the while studying his freckled-spattered face, which was somehow paler than usual. "Honestly, I don't know why you're so nervous. It's only my parents—who, by the way, are entirely aware that this situation isn't your fault."

"That's easy for you to say," Ron said miserably as he plopped down next to Neville in their compartment on the Hogwarts Express.

At the realization that the train was slowing its approach as it rapidly neared London, carrying the students closer to their respective homes for the Easter holidays, Ron and Hermione had only just returned to their compartment after doing their rounds as prefects, a task made easier due to the fact that the students seemed to be on their best behavior because of the intimidating presence of the Aurors.

"My parents love you," Ron added. "Mum's already knitting miniature jumpers and practically planning our wedding..."

"Don't be so ridiculous," Hermione admonished as she took a seat next to Luna across from the two boys, plucking up Crookshanks from the bench between them and clutching the warm, ginger cat to herself, relishing the deep purrs that vibrated through him. "My parents like you as well."

"Hermione, they like my *parents*. Pretty sure I haven't actually exchanged more than three words with 'em at a time. I'd bet you anything they're wishing that Harry'd been the one to...to y'know..." His ears became a deep shade of crimson, and Neville fidgeted uncomfortably next to him, suddenly finding the view of the setting sun outside the window to be very interesting indeed.

"Rubbish," Hermione brushed his concerns off, ignoring the fact that she and Ron weren't alone in the compartment. In any case, it wasn't as if it was a secret anymore: Over three weeks had passed since Hermione's accident and Ron's poisoning. They had done their best to ignore the often vicious gossiping and whispering and had explained the situation to their closest family and friends, Neville and Luna among them, but they hadn't attempted to hide the fact that they were now together from the student body—although Hermione adamantly insisted on keeping public displays of affection to a minimum. Even if publicly engaging in such intimate behavior didn't, quite simply, make her uncomfortable, the idea of snogging Ron in public reminded her a bit too much of how Ron had so recently and freely snogged *Lavender* in public.

Furthermore, there was Lavender to contend with: Ron had worked up the courage to explain to

her what had happened with the potion and had even—as gently as he could, or so he had said—admitted to her that he and Hermione were together now; as a result, although she wasn't exactly civil, at least Lavender had stopped glaring daggers at her and storming from their shared dormitory every time Hermione entered it. Parvati, for her part, was courteous enough toward Hermione, although she steadfastly ignored Ron—which Hermione couldn't say she blamed her for one bit.

What had Lavender done, really, to deserve ill-treatment? She was a girl whose only crime had been to like a boy, and, despite any feelings of personal dislike that Hermione may harbor toward the other girl—she couldn't look at Lavender now without seeing her kneeling before Ron, his trousers around his ankles—that sort of longing was something that she could empathize with; after all, Hermione herself had been the one previously crying her eyes out every night over Ron Weasley.

Therefore, it simply didn't feel right to...rub her newfound relationship with Ron in Lavender's face, so to speak. Perhaps a more vindictive and less sympathetic girl wouldn't have had any qualms with it, but, temper or not, that simply wasn't Hermione.

"The idea that my parents would prefer Harry over you is just ludicrous," Hermione said presently, shaking off thoughts of Lavender as she nuzzled her cheek against Crookshanks's soft fur.

Ron snorted at that, clearly unconvinced. "Yeah, right."

"Harry is nice and all, but anyone can see that he's all wrong for Hermione, Ron," Luna spoke up matter-of-factly, reaching over to scratch Crookshanks between his ears. "There's simply no chemistry there—although a shot of Essence of Whipper-Tubber might simulate that."

Ron looked like he wanted to laugh: "Essence of—?"

"Oh, yes, research that Daddy has done proves that Essence of Whipper-Tubber contains a variety of valuable magical properties and uses. But that's neither here nor there, as it's quite obvious that Harry already fancies Ginny, isn't it?"

Hermione, Ron, and Neville all stared at her: "It—it is?" Neville finally stammered while Ron continued to merely gape at her, his mouth open in an almost comical expression. Of course, Hermione had suspected as much about Harry, but hearing it spoken aloud like it was the most blatantly apparent thing in the world was a bit jarring somehow.

"Certainly," Luna replied with a small laugh, like they were all being silly. "Why do you think he chose to stay at Hogwarts over Easter? Because Ginny chose to do so, of course."

"Or," Ron said a bit too loudly, "maybe he stayed 'cause he didn't wanna go to the Muggles."

Hermione bit her lip anxiously as she watched him: She knew for a fact that Ron knew that Mrs. Weasley had invited Harry to the Burrow even though Ron wouldn't be there. Hermione suspected that Ginny and Harry had chosen to remain at the castle so that they would have the Gryffindor common room, for the most part, to themselves—even if neither would admit it to anyone, much less to the other, since Ginny was still technically with Dean and there was the added complication of Ginny being Harry's best friend's sister.

"Harry has an important assignment that he has to complete," Hermione inserted fluidly, referring to his assigned task of extracting the true memory about Horcruxes from Professor Slughorn, as she extended one leg to nudge Ron's ankle with her foot. "I'm positive that's why he stayed." She smiled at him then, and he returned it, but there was a strangely distant look in his eye and

something about the set of his jaw that told her that his thoughts lingered on the idea of Harry and his little sister practically alone at the school together—and it was evident that he didn't like that thought one bit.

Hermione supposed that she would just have to find a way to distract him while he was at home with her for the week—a thought that had her brimming with nervous anticipation, as she and Ron hadn't done more than snog and hold hands since they'd become an official couple: As they'd agreed upon after his poisoning, they had indeed taken several steps back and were attempting to proceed at a natural, unhurried pace.

Although, admittedly, she had been wondering as of late how soon would be too soon to expedite the process just a bit physically... And judging by how obviously excited he became during their snogging sessions, Hermione had an inkling that it wouldn't take much to persuade him to her line of thinking, if that's what she wanted...

Her breathing sped up at that thought, her pulse quickening as the familiar warmth pooled between her legs.

Sometimes she wondered if trace effects of that potion still lingered in her system, because although she'd always been attracted to Ron on a physical level, that attraction seemed to have augmented to the point of distraction: In class, instead of always concentrating on her schoolwork, she found herself fantasizing about him lifting up her skirt, shoving her knickers aside, and taking her right there on the teacher's desk...which had led to some embarrassing moments when her professors had called on her for answers and she'd been forced to ask them to repeat themselves. The one time she had made the mistake of allowing that to happen in Defense, Professor Snape had had no qualms about humiliating her, as he seemed to have known*exactly* what she'd been thinking about.

Or, instead of her newfound randiness being the result of some long-term aftereffect of the potion, perhaps it was merely the effect of pregnancy hormones. Or maybe it was the fact that she already knew what physical love with Ron could be like—and she wanted more...so much more.

"Oh, you mean for extra credit?" Luna inquired, and it took Hermione several moments to even register what the other girl was talking about.

"Something like that," she replied vaguely, shaking herself out of thoughts of Ron shagging her brainless with a fair amount of effort.

Thankfully, Luna didn't have the opportunity to persist, because at that moment the train's whistle sounded mightily, startling them all somewhat and alerting them to the fact that they were steaming into King's Cross Station.

As the Hogwarts Express slowed to a shuddering, rattling stop, Hermione ushered Crookshanks into his kennel while Ron retrieved their rucksacks from the top rack. "Barmy, that one," Ron muttered in a low voice after they'd bid Luna and Neville a happy holiday and were stepping off the train and out onto the busy platform.

"I thought you said she was growing on you," Hermione teased as she scanned the faces in the crowd, seeking her mum, who alone was supposed to be meeting them, as her father had a prior engagement and wouldn't be home until a bit later.

"Yeah, well, that was before she said that my best mate fancies my sister, wasn't it?"

"Oh, honestly, Ron, Ginny is perfectly capable of making her own..." Her voice trailed off as she caught sight of Lavender, who was crouched next to a woman that looked remarkably like her,

while tearfully embracing a little boy that could only be her brother: Lavender had spoken of her brother before, in prior years when the two girls had been on better terms, and Hermione remembered that he was a Squib, but that didn't matter to Lavender, who adored him all the same.

Briefly, their eyes met over the top of the little boy's head, but then Ron was pulling Hermione in the opposite direction: "There's your mum," he said into her ear, his arm slipping around her waist as he steered her attention elsewhere, and the nervousness in his voice was palpable.

Whipping her head in the direction he indicated, she spotted her mother deep in an animated, enthusiastic discussion with Seamus Finnigan's mother: Over the years, Hermione's mum, ever the social butterfly, had formed several "platform acquaintanceships," as she called them, with the parents of a handful of her classmates; with the help of her platform acquaintances, she was, as a Muggle, able to cross the barrier to platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$.

"See ya, Ron, 'Ermione. Have a good holiday, yeah?" Seamus called happily as they approached, giving the couple a lazy wave as Mrs. Finnigan and Jean Granger exchanged parting pleasantries.

And then the mother-and-son pair were gone, and Hermione found herself engulfed in her own mother's arms. "Hermione!" Mum exclaimed as if she hadn't seen her in a year before forcing her back an arm's length and scrutinizing her daughter's slender frame. "Has the morning sickness begun yet?—which, you should know, is a misnomer since it can occur at any time, day or night. And are you taking your vitamins? Are you eating and getting enough sleep? Ron, are you making sure that she eats?"

"Er—yeah, I mean—yes, Mrs. Granger."

"It's 'Jean,'" Mum said good-naturedly as she released Hermione and moved to hug Ron as well. "Mrs. Granger is my mother-in-law. My, how you've gotten taller since the last time I saw you—and broader!" she gushed, playfully patting Ron's shoulders with both hands as his face turned as red as his hair. "You've grown into quite the specimen, Ronald Weasley. It's no small wonder that my daughter fancies you, as you're entirely fanciable!"

"Mum," Hermione said weakly, feeling beyond mortified. "You could at least refrain from embarrassing us until we get to the car."

"Now, what fun would that be, darling?" Mum replied sweetly as she wrapped one arm around her daughter's shoulders and her other around Ron's waist, leading them back toward the barrier. "I hope you two are hungry; I thought we'd have dinner at that little Italian place that you love, Hermione. I thought it would be a treat for you as well, Ron—from what I understand, you haven't experienced much, ah, *Muggle* culture, I believe you call it."

"No, ma'am—I mean, er, Jean—not really."

"In that case, this week should be a lot of fun for you, and a fine opportunity to sample our culture: I bought tickets to the ballet for this weekend, and perhaps you'd enjoy visiting the galleria? And I'm sure that Hermione would just *adore* taking you out to the cinema, since your mother has hinted that your world doesn't actually offer much in the way of arts and entertainment, other than that sport of yours."

Mum led them to the parking garage, chattering away in that manner she had when she was particularly excited or happy, asking questions and not really giving anyone an opportunity to respond: "Oh, did Hermione tell you that we got her a new car for her birthday that she's hardly had a chance to drive? She's quite the conscientious driver, as you can imagine... Oh, drat, that actually reminds me—I need to fill up on petrol before we head out..."

Ron caught Hermione's eye behind her mother's back. "What's petrol?" he mouthed.

"Think of it as a sort of potion that makes the car go," she whispered back, unable to stop her chuckle of amusement: Ron had rarely ever ventured into the Muggle world, so she knew this should prove to be quite the culture shock for him—but it could be a great deal of fun as well, as Mum had said.

He seemed to be mulling that one over as they reached her mother's pristine silver Jetta, and Mum unlocked it, wrenching open one of the rear doors. "Climb in, kids. I know you lovebirds will want to sit together," she said with a playful wink.

Hermione rolled her eyes at her mother, but she couldn't stop the grin that tugged up the corners of her lips as she climbed in next to Ron, placing Crookshanks's cage on the floorboard between her feet. "See?" she said to Ron, nudging him as she reached across him to buckle his seatbelt while Mum stowed their rucksacks in the trunk. "I told you it would be all right."

"Yeah, well, we haven't seen your dad yet, have we?" he muttered, but before she could formulate a response, Mum had pulled open the driver's side door and slid behind the wheel.

She grinned at them in the rearview mirror. "All set, then?"

oOo

Ron sat in almost-silence for the duration of the car ride, watching the streets and buildings zoom by the windows as he vaguely listened to Mrs. Granger—or Jean, as she insisted on being called—pointing out various pieces of Muggle architecture and whatnot. He answered all of her questions as politely as he could and tried valiantly to pretend like he was actually paying attention to her: Even though he was looking forward to spending the week in the Muggle world with Hermione, he was nervous as all hell about meeting up with her dad at the restaurant; he therefore spent the entire forty-five minute drive envisioning all different types of scenarios, the nicest—not to mention least likely—one being that Mr. Granger greets him warmly and welcomes him as a son.

In the worst-case one, he...well, Hermione's dad couldn't hex him, could he, but Ron imagined that Mr. Granger could come up with some interesting, not to mention excruciating, *Muggle* means of getting even with the boy who'd managed to impregnate his only daughter...

He almost let out a snort of delirious laughter as he thought, *Forget Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived*. He was Ron Weasley, The Boy With The Unusually High Sperm Count, or Ron Weasley, The Virile One. Now *that*, he reckoned, was somethin' to be proud of. Or at least it would be if he didn't currently fear for his life.

Ron swallowed hard, torn between hilarity and terror as he felt Hermione's hand squeeze his thigh. He turned to look at her then, attempting to return her smile—she really was fucking pretty, wasn't she?—but all he could seem to manage was a painful grimace; it was a testament to his state of mind that his entire body didn't react to her hand so near his bits on his upper leg.

"Look at it this way," she whispered as she leaned into his ear, "at least we'll be in public. He can't exactly kill you if there are witnesses present. Entirely too risky."

He stared at her for a moment, stunned, only realizing that she was taking the piss when she dissolved into giggles—apparently in response to the expression on his face. "Ron, I'm joking," she said around her laughter. "It's going to be fine, I promise."

Ron broke into a chortle as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, giving her a one-armed squeeze and feeling immeasurably grateful to have her with him. "Love you," he whispered into her ear before kissing the top of her head, wanting her to know how deeply appreciative he was of her.

He could practically feel Jean's eyes on them in the rearview mirror as Hermione turned faintly pink and whispered, "I love you, too," before placing a chaste but lingering kiss against his cheek.

Ron was still nervous when they pulled up to the restaurant, but for some reason he was feeling a helluva lot more relaxed.

Chapter 21: Wonderland

Chapter Twenty-One: Wonderland

oOo

This chapter is set between HBP Chapter Twenty: Lord Voldemort's Request and Chapter Twenty-One: The Unknowable Room.

oOo

Ron breathed a bit easier on the ride home from the little Muggle restaurant with the red-and-white checkered tablecloths, even if he instinctively kept his distance from Hermione, being sure not to touch her, as he had a feeling that Mr. Granger was watching his every move from the front passenger seat. (Hermione's dad had taken a cab to the restaurant, so as such he was riding to the house with them in Jean's car.)

Mr. Granger seemed to be an easy-going enough type of bloke, although not exactly as friendly as his wife, and Ron could easily see why his dad liked him. Even still, throughout dinner—which had turned out to be pretty bloody good, and he'd practically inhaled his pasta once he'd relaxed enough to eat—he felt as if Mr. Granger had been studying him, like he was trying to figure him out. Sorta like how you might study your opponent's positions on a chessboard, weighing your options and considering your advantages before making your next move.

Was that what Mr. Granger was doing? Studying Ron? Weighing his options? Considering his next move? Friendly enough or not, Hermione's dad certainly hadn't asked Ron to call him "Hugo," had he? Not that he'd expected him to, o'course.

Ron tried to think what he'd do in a similar situation, how he'd react if it was *his* daughter. Would he be able to calmly sit in a restaurant and have a civil conversation with the bloke that'd knocked up his teenage daughter, even if the situation had been out of said bloke's control?

Not bloody likely.

In that instant, Ron was struck by the reality of the fact that he very well might *have* a daughter. Or two of them. He and Hermione didn't know yet if they were having boys or girls, or even one of each, since Ron knew very well that, in the case of fraternal twins as opposed to identical, that was a possibility. He got a sudden, very vivid mental image of himself bouncing on his knee a baby girl with wild, unkempt ginger hair and wearing a pink jumpsuit while another crawled around his ankles, attempting to pull herself up by Ron's trousers with her chubby little fists...

He had to say, he liked the image; Merlin help him, he really fucking did. Blimey, weren't blokes supposed to want boys? Miniature versions of themselves that would...eat dirt and put toads in their pockets?

Whatever. He didn't really give a rat's arse as long as they were happy and healthy and—

"What are you grinning about?" Hermione whispered suddenly, nudging his arm with her elbow, and he saw that the corners of her lips were upturned, mimicking the smile that he hadn't even realized had been plastered on his face until that moment.

"I'll tell you later," he whispered back, attempting to wipe the goofy smirk off of his face as he caught Mr. Granger's eye in the rearview mirror.

In a sudden, unexpected act of defiance, Ron reached out and grabbed Hermione's hand, entwining his fingers in hers and pulling their joined hands to his lips, where he planted light kisses to her knuckles. Even as she threw a nervous glance at the back of her father's head, she beamed at the unexpected gesture, and Ron didn't miss the flush of her cheeks in the headlights of the car behind them.

Check, he thought with a fair amount of pride. *I'm moving in on your king...*

oOo

Hermione's heart swelled inexorably with pride in response to Ron's boldness, to the man that he was quickly becoming, as he gripped her hand the remainder of the drive home. Even though she knew that he'd been intimidated by her father at the restaurant, he was standing his ground, silently proclaiming that he was living up to his responsibilities—and that was quite admirable indeed.

He really was "stepping up to the plate," as the phrase that Dad was often fond of saying went, wasn't he? A lesser man than Ron, or boy, she should say, wouldn't have taken this situation in such stride, and she discovered that she actually wasn't all that surprised by his newfound maturity: Hermione had always known that his heart and loyalty were his better traits, and she was pleased to see him growing into those qualities that she'd always admired about him.

She was interrupted from her musings when she recognized that they'd pulled into their neighborhood: She watched Ron's face as he gazed in evident awe at the moon-washed, impeccably kept lawns and the neat, two and three-story brick homes. "That's the sorta house I'd like to live in someday," he said lowly so that only she could hear. "For us—me, you, the babies—y'know, not shoddy like the Burrow, but not stuffy like the museums where some o'the richer Wizarding families live..."

"I happen to think the Burrow is brilliant," Hermione answered just as lowly, giddy by how casually he'd spoken of having a future with her when they hadn't actually had a conversation at length about it; for the moment, they were simply working into the groove of a relationship before discussing the next steps—though it was always at the back of her mind as she was sure it was for Ron as well. After all, they would have two children in a matter of months—a thought that both excited and scared her in equal measure. "I love how full of people and...and noise and laughter it always is."

"Those are all the things I *don't* love about it," he replied ironically. "You try growing up with the likes of Fred and George taking the Mickey out on you all the time, and no privacy..." His ears glowed faintly red, and Hermione couldn't help but wonder what particular mortifying memory he was recalling.

"And you try growing up in a house entirely too large for a family of three," she returned in a whisper, not wanting Mum or Dad to overhear. "Nothing*but* privacy and solitude, especially with two parents that work all the—oh, we're here," she added as they pulled into the driveway of the Granger family home, which looked much the same as the neighboring houses, complete with great stone lions flanking the entryway. Ron raised an eyebrow at that, and she shrugged almost sheepishly:

"I suppose it's a sign that I was always meant to be in Gryffindor."

Within minutes they'd unloaded the car and filed into the house, and Hermione observed Ron as he glanced about, as wide-eyed as a child; the irony that she had been in his childhood home on upward of twenty separate occasions and yet he'd never once before stepped foot across her threshold didn't escape her. "Welcome to Wonderland, Alice," she said into his ear, standing on the tips of her toes in order to reach him better. "Just wait 'til Dad shows you his prize large-screen

in the rec room."

"The what in the what? And I've no sodding idea who Alice is, but I'm a *bloke*, Hermione," he retorted, his tone mock-serious as his gaze landed meaningfully on her stomach: "Clearly."

"Hermione, dear, why don't you show Ron up to his room?" Mum offered suddenly while Hermione blushed at Ron's words. "I'll get started on the tea."

With Ron hefting Crookshanks's cage and both their rucksacks, Hermione didn't hesitate to lock her hand around his upper arm and drag him through the foyer and up the staircase.

oOo

Hugo Granger watched his Hermione as she quite literally hauled Arthur Weasley's youngest son up the stairs, his thoughts and emotions one behemoth mass of conflict: He loved his daughter dearly and wanted what was best for her, and Ronald seemed to be a decent enough lad; he clearly cared for Hermione, but they were both young—so very *young*, and Hugo knew from firsthand experience what it was like to be an adolescent boy with straying eyes and the desire to sow one's wild oats.

Furthermore, he couldn't help but feel as if his daughter had been cheated out of the life that she was meant to have—a life of living up to her full potential, which she had in spades, a life of travel and of discovery and of accomplishment, and, now, in a few months' time, she would be...what? Married to that boy? Relegated to the house and caring for two infants fulltime while the boy earned a living for them all? Of course motherhood was a fine pursuit, but Hermione was not a normal girl—she was quite extraordinary, in fact—and therefore the idea of her living a less-than-extraordinary life somehow seemed a terrible waste, didn't it?

And what happened to Hermione and those two as-yet-unborn children if, by chance, the boy changed his mind? Decided that pastures were greener elsewhere?

Hermione had said that she wasn't planning on marrying Ronald Weasley, but how long would that last? They had created life together, after all, and she was clearly smitten with him. Of course, married or no, Hugo absolutely expected the boy to live up to his obligations—and for that school to do its part as well, as Albus Dumbledore had promised them it would, since the accident wouldn't have occurred in the first place had its charges been properly supervised.

"I hope he knows that he can never do better than her," Hugo remarked to his wife, who was stowing her bag and shoes in the coat closet.

"He's a lovely boy," she replied as she moved to stand before him, drawing his hands into hers and peering up into his face. "And you know as well as I do that Hermione is perfectly capable of making her own informed decisions: If she chooses a life with him—and, if I know my daughter, she will—we'll have no choice but to trust that decision, to trust *her*. Besides, young women make such situations work all the time, love; just because she's pregnant doesn't mean she can't balance her education and a career. If anyone is clever and hardworking enough to pull it off, our Hermione is. Come on," she added, tugging on his hands. "Help me prepare the refreshments."

Hugo considered Jean's words as he followed her into the kitchen and retrieved a tin of biscuits from the cupboard while his wife put the kettle on. "It's not entirely about that, darling," he said as he absently opened the tin and arranged the biscuits on a tray. "It's that world of theirs. At the meeting the Headmaster all but said that the Board of Governors would be voting on whether or not to shut down the school—what with the other 'accidents' he spoke of; Ronald himself was poisoned shortly after Hermione's incident, was he not, and there was that other girl from Hermione's House, Katie. I don't like it. I think that we should speak to Hermione about coming

back home to have the babies, maybe taking a break from that world—I'm not suggesting we talk her out of being with that boy—"

"Ron, Hugo," Jean said, turning in front of the stove to face her husband. "His name is Ron Weasley, and he's the son of your dear friend, Arthur."

"Yes, I'm well aware of who he is, darling: He's the boy who impregnated our teenage daughter."

"I understand why you're upset, sweetheart," Jean said with a resigned sigh. "Truly, I do—believe me, I've lost quite a bit of sleep over this whole situation—but Ron is just as much a victim as Hermione is."

"He had a choice," Hugo said quietly. "Dumbledore said that it didn't have to be him necessarily, but he volunteered."

Jean gaped at him in evident disbelief. "The Headmaster and that Healer from the hospital also said that it had to be a Weasley—someone with a similar genetic structure. What are you suggesting? That they should have sent for one of Arthur's other sons? Do you honestly believe that Hermione would have consented to that when she's clearly in love with Ron?"

Hugo sighed in frustration, squeezing his eyes shut momentarily. "Of course not. I suppose I'm simply...frustrated, exhausted from thinking about this... I'm not trying to be unfair to the boy—to Ron—but I want to be certain of his intentions."

"As Hermione's father, I would expect nothing less of you," Jean said with a nod of approval.

"Also, I truly think that we should talk to her about coming home for the time being. We could hire a nanny and get her enrolled in a good university—her transcripts will have to be forged, obviously, there's simply no getting around that—and we'll work out an arrangement with Ron and Arthur and Molly—I know they'll want to be involved, and I wouldn't dream of trying to deny them that right, even if they *couldn't* magic us into oblivion if they so chose..."

"All right, Hugo, we'll speak to Hermione and Ron *both*—Ron has just as much of a right to be involved and have a say in those babies' lives as Hermione does—and see what comes of it. But no pushing our will on them—agreed? It will have to be their decision—and we're not discussing it with them tonight as it's been a long day and we're all positively knackered."

"Right you are, darling, of course."

"Aren't I always?" she said with a cheeky grin, leaning up to plant a kiss to her husband's cheek.

"That you are. But I'm still speaking to the boy tonight..."

"His name is *Ron*, Hugo."

oOo

Ron followed Hermione as she dragged him down the hallway off the first landing; he glanced around curiously, studying the paintings and the quite stationary portraits—including several of a younger Hermione.

"This is where you'll be sleeping," she announced, stepping inside of an open door, the first on the right-hand side.

He followed her into the room, taking in the neutral yet tasteful décor, the full-size bed with its cream-colored bedspread framed by a window with off-white lace curtains. This room was clearly

used regularly as a guest bedroom, as there was nothing particularly personal about it.

"There are fresh linens and towels in the wardrobe," Hermione was saying as Ron walked further into the room and dropped his rucksack on the immaculately-made bed. "As you can see," she added, gesturing at the small desk in the corner, "there's a phone and a computer with dial-up, but I don't suppose you'll have any use for that." She gave a small laugh as if she'd forgotten who she was talking to. "Oh, and you'll have to use the loo in the hall—it's the door directly across from yours—as this room doesn't have its own, I'm afraid."

"Considering I grew up using one toilet for six other people, I think I'll manage," Ron said with a wry grin.

"Right," she said, stopping in the middle of the room, a strange expression on her face. He couldn't help but feel struck anew by how pretty she was, even in plain jeans and a jumper, with her bushy hair in its usual plait down her back. You couldn't tell it yet by looking at her, but the idea that she was pregnant by him somehow made him randier than all hell.

"What is it?" he asked, ignoring the stirrings of his stupid, perpetually horny body.

"It's just—it's strange, isn't it? Your being here—in my house?"

"Oh."

"No, Ron—I mean it's a *good* thing," she said with a reassuring laugh, crossing the room and wrapping both arms around his middle, burrowing into his chest. "I'm so unbelievably happy you're here."

Ron breathed a sigh of relief as he returned her embrace eagerly, burying his face in her wild hair and still feeling a bit gobsmacked that he was allowed to do this now: hold her, bury his face in her hair, snog her. And knowing that she loved and wanted him, too... It was almost too much to handle, too good to be true, as the cliché went.

"And I'm happy to be here," he said truthfully, not caring if he sounded like a tit. "Even if your dad hates me."

"Oh, honestly, he does not," she protested, pulling away slightly as she peered up at him with a customary eye-roll that suggested he was being ridiculous. "He was perfectly polite."

"Right, then. I reckon you must've missed the I'm-gonna-murder-you-in-your-sleep way he eyed me all through dinner—and the way he stabbed at his salad like he was imagining stabbing my bol—"

"Oh, rubbish," Hermione interjected in an attempt at being stern, but she failed miserably as she was laughing. "He did no such thing. You merely mistranslated what you saw because it's what you were *expecting* to see. Now, he may've been fantasizing about stabbing your *spleen*, or another such organ, but your bollocks? Don't be so dramatic, Ron."

His eyes widened as he stared at her in shock, and not just because she was taking the piss out on him again: "Hermione, you just said b—"

"Care to see my room now?" she interrupted, and there was no, ah...*mistranslating* the mischievous sparkle in her eye.

"Er—yeah—sure."

Hermione's bedroom. It was something that he'd attempted to picture a million times before. Okay,

so he'd only ever been in one girl's bedroom, and that was his sister's—wow, he really was pathetic, wasn't he?—but Ron couldn't imagine that Hermione kept posters of Gwenog Jones or any other Quidditch players on her walls, so, what, then? It wouldn't be all pink and girly like he imagined Lavender's would be. No, he reckoned Hermione'd have books—lots o'books and...and a life-size likeness of him, Ron, next to her bed, only this likeness had that Keeper from Puddlemere's body...and way less freckles. And a tan. Birds liked tans, right? Right, well, he didn't reckon a tan would look good with his ginger hair, would it? He wondered how he'd look as a blond...not white-blond like that tosser Malfoy, but a golden blond with a tan and a winning smile...

He grimaced then as his thoughts drifted to that git Lockhart. All right, scratch that bit about the winning smile and the blond hair, then.

"Well, here it is," Hermione said, nervousness having replaced her prior playfulness, once she'd moved two doors down from his own room—only two doors down!—and pushed open a door identical to all the others.

Her bedroom was huge; the entire Burrow could probably fit inside it, and there were two doors leading off the main room, one to her own private loo, he reckoned, and the other to her closet. Like he'd imagined, it was all neat and orderly, like Hermione, with loads of books neatly placed on double rows of bookshelves—he wouldn't be surprised if they were alphabetized, or else organized based on category—and there was a light wooden dresser with more pictures—one of him and Harry, the only one moving—and other trinkets like small jewelry boxes and some funny-looking Muggle devices. (Funny, but for some reason he'd never thought about Hermione having Muggle things in her bedroom.)

The bed, placed in the very center of the room, was enormous and covered with a pretty purple-and-cream duvet that matched the rug and the curtains.

His eyes lingered on that spot for longer than necessary. This was Hermione's bed. This was where she slept when she was home, where she read, where she did...other things that Ron couldn't help but think about her doing—preferably while thinking of him—and he imagined that her scent like vanilla was all wrapped up in the sheets, just like her legs might be while doing that thing that he thought about her doing...

Oh bloody Merlin.

Okay, it wasn't as if he'd never seen where she slept before. She slept in Ginny's bedroom when she stayed at the Burrow, didn't she? Even still, there was something incredibly personal about being here, like hardly anyone had ever seen the private sanctuary that was Hermione Granger's bedroom—and he reckoned hardly anyone had: Hermione never talked about having friends at home. Over the years she'd mentioned a cousin or two that would come to her house, but, to Ron's memory, there weren't many people that might visit her here.

"Well?" Hermione prompted him abruptly, and his eyes shot to where she stood in front of her bureau, wringing her hands like she was waiting for him to proclaim some grand judgment. He considered his optional responses:

Wicked.

Where's the life-sized likeness of me?

What came out instead was, "I like your bed. It's really...roomy." He'd been thinking about how small his own was, but he didn't realize how suggestive the words were until they'd left his lips. "What—what I meant," he quickly backtracked as the heat rose to his ears, "is that mine's

tiny..." *Wait, what?*" Mine's tiny" were two words that should never leave any bloke's lips, whether it was true or not—but Hermione was already well aware that his was hardly "tiny," wasn't she? (The large part of him that was distinctly male couldn't help but puff out his chest with pride at that thought.)

Hermione all but smirked at him, even as she blushed and bit her lower lip in that adorable way of hers. "I'm glad you like it," she said wryly.

Ron's face flushed hotly as he placed her rucksack and Crookshanks's empty kennel—they'd let the flea ball out at the front door—on the floor before straightening to his full height, gathering his courage as he did so. *Be smooth, you tosspot*, he ordered himself. *You already got the girl; no need to act like a bumbling idiot*. "I do, as a matter o'fact," he stated, purposefully lowering the tenor of his voice a bit as he began stalking toward her, slowly bridging the distance between their bodies. "I like it a lot."

He stopped not an inch in front of her, the rise and fall of her chest as her breathing labored in evident excitement causing her breasts to brush against his ribcage through their clothing on her every inhale. Meeting her wide, suddenly lustful (he hoped) gaze, he lifted one hand, entangling his fingers in her hair as she licked her lips in obvious invitation, and he lowered his head toward hers. "I gotta tell ya, 'Ermione," he breathed into her ear, his lips lingering at the sensitive shell of her ear, his other hand that had been cupping her hip now sliding over the smooth, soft skin of her belly beneath her jumper, "the idea that you're pregnant by me makes me so...fucking...horny... Fuck, I know it's completely mental, but I can't bloody help myself. I get so bleedin' hard just thinking about..."—*taking you, cumming in you*—"about the fact that I got you pregnant..." He couldn't believe he'd just confessed that to her, but it was the truth, wasn't it? Well, the less crude version, anyway.

Hermione audibly gulped, her chest heaving as her body quaked against his. "That—that's not so mental," she breathed in an unsteady voice. "I—I think about it all the time," she returned in a breathy confession of her own. "The fact that it's a bit of you that you've planted inside me... Remembering...how that bit of you got there..."

It was like a Bludger whacked Ron in the back of his head, knocking him stupid. He pulled back slightly to peer down into her earnest face, and when the tip of her pink tongue darted out once more to dampen her lips, he bloody lost it: Grasping her hips with both hands and pulling her body flush against his, he crashed his lips down on hers, forgetting where they were as he literally devoured her, ignoring the way their teeth clashed gracelessly together in his raw impatience; Hermione met his unrefined passion in kind, her fingers raking his scalp, ensnaring in his shaggy hair, her tongue feuding for dominancy with his, and the fuckhot *sounds* she was bloody making—the little whimpers and pants—was doing him in. He was of a mind to pick her up, carry her to that huge bed of hers, and shag her 'til she screamed his name.

Fucking hell, it'd be so easy, too. They'd already done it once, hadn't they? Technically three times to Ron's count. He'd never forget how fucking good she'd felt, her tight, slick little quim sheathing him, and it was something he wanted to feel again, dammit, and to hell with the whole "waiting" rubbish he'd spouted on about—'cause at that moment there wasn't enough oxygen to allow him to think with both heads at once, and he couldn't remember a single damned good reason for denying them what they both so clearly wanted.

Especially now that her hands were beneath his shirt between their bodies, lightly scraping over his nipples and down his stomach, doing bloody wicked things to him that sent jolts straight to his aching knob...

The sound of someone clearing their throat from the open doorway brought him to a screeching halt, and he literally wrenched himself off of Hermione, staggering backwards and tripping over

that blasted kennel that belonged to Hermione's stupid cat, landing in a rather embarrassing heap.

Mortified, Ron leapt to his feet at once to find himself face-to-face with Hermione and her mother, either Granger woman mirroring the other with both hands clamped comically to their mouths, their eyes wide in their faces.

"Ron, are you all right—?" Hermione finally asked once she'd recovered from the shock of watching him make a buffoon of himself, and he didn't miss the glimmer of hilarity in her eyes that she was trying to conceal. Rather poorly, he might add.

As for Jean, she looked like she was about to explode with the effort not to laugh. "So sorry I startled you, dears," she said sweetly. "I just wanted to let you know that the tea's ready."

"Thank you, Mum, we'll be down shortly," Hermione said, just as prim and composed as if she hadn't just been caught with her hand in the figurative cookie jar, but the pinkness of her cheeks was apparent.

"Of course, darling. Oh, and do try to remember that we have these marvelous inventions called 'doors' for a reason. Surely they have them in the magical world as well?" She then eyed Hermione meaningfully. "We wouldn't want to give your father a heart attack, now, would we?"

With a knowing smirk and a wink, Hermione's mum pivoted on the ball of her foot and was gone as quickly as she'd come.

"Fucking hell," Ron groaned, one hand absently rubbing the back of his neck, his face positively burning with his humiliation. "Your mum's...different, isn't she?"

When all Hermione did was burst into laughter, he couldn't help but join her. Blimey, this was gonna be one interesting week, wasn't it?

Chapter 22: Song and Dance

Chapter Twenty-Two: Song and Dance

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This chapter is set between HBP Chapter Twenty: Lord Voldemort's Request and Chapter Twenty-One: The Unknowable Room.

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"What's really been weighing on me, Ron," Mr. Granger said thoughtfully as he leaned against the bookcase, gazing absently at the crystal tumbler in his hand, "what I'd *really* like to know, as Hermione's father and the grandfather of her unborn twins, is what, exactly, are your intentions? What do you plan to do now?"

Ron choked back the rancid Muggle liquor, which wasn't all that different from firewhisky, really, and blinked away the sudden wateriness of his eyes as he tried not to sputter and cough like a twat.

He'd been anticipating that very question since Mr. Granger had invited Ron to his study for a drink following the rather awkward tea in the sitting room with Hermione and her parents. (He'd had a lot of difficulty looking Mr. Granger in the eye, feeling certain that he could see it in Ron's face that Ron had been less-than-innocently snogging the older man's only daughter in her bedroom not minutes before.)

As Hermione had nodded at Ron and smiled in encouragement, he'd awkwardly followed her father from the room, feeling scared shitless, certain that he was being cornered.

Now Mr. Granger had just confirmed that the young wizard's suspicions had been correct, but he couldn't say he blamed the man: What would his own dad do if it was Ginny? What would Ron himself do if it was his own daughter?

"What—?—er—I mean..." Well, he reckoned that expecting the question hadn't given him the ability to articulate a coherent response. *Bloody hell*. If he was gonna sputter like a tit, he might as well hand his bollocks over on a silver platter, for all the respect Hermione's dad would have for him.

"My daughter, Ron," Hugo Granger clarified, just a hint of impatience coloring his tone. "What are your intentions? Are you planning on marrying her? Getting a job? Helping to raise the children?" His brown eyes, eerily like Hermione's, pierced Ron in a penetrating, hawk-like manner; his expression wasn't exactly accusatory or stern, really, but the look of a man who was genuinely concerned for his daughter and wanted what was best for her.

Ron reckoned that he and Hermione's dad had that in common.

It wasn't like Ron was daft. All right, well, he reckoned he could be a bit thick at times, but he knew how smart Hermione was; he was more than aware that she could have anything or anyone in the bloody world that she wanted, and that the course of their lives had become altered and irreparably intertwined a month ago because of that sodding potion.

He didn't know if there was such a thing as fate or if shite just happened at random for no apparent fucking reason at all, but what he *did* know was that he couldn't change what was done; neither he nor Hermione had asked for this, and all they could do now was try to make the best of an

outwardly bad situation—and it wasn't all *that* bad, was it? It was the catalyst for him and Hermione finally getting together, admitting their feelings, wasn't it?

He just had to find a smooth way to tell Mr. Granger that he wouldn't let Hermione down. If this ended—and Ron *really* couldn't stomach the thought—it would be on Hermione's terms, not his. And even if she did end it, he still had every intention of doing his part as the father.

This is it, he told himself as he placed the half-emptied tumbler on the desk, feeling the liquor warm his belly as he watched the remainder of the amber liquid slosh around in the glass. Calling on a confidence and all the Gryffindor courage that he didn't actually feel, he mentally worked out what he was going to say: While he didn't like the idea of spouting some pompous, Percy-like speech, the last thing he wanted was to boggle this up since he wouldn't get another chance at a first impression. *Honesty is always the best policy*, as his dad would say.

"Yeah," Ron finally said, looking up and meeting Mr. Granger full in the eye, stifling his nervousness with a considerable amount of effort. "I plan on doing all those things. Reckon I always wanted that stuff with Hermione; it just looks like it's gonna happen a bit sooner than I ever thought, is all."

Mr. Granger was silent for almost a full minute as he regarded Ron thoughtfully, the silence and the tension ballooning in the air between the two men like a bubble ready to burst at any moment with the slightest pinprick. "You're a seventeen-year-old boy," Hermione's father finally said as he straightened to his full height, his tone not exactly harsh, but not too friendly either. "You have no idea what you want. I've no doubt that you *think* that you do, but teenage boys are fickle. Their wants tend to...evolve."

"Not with me, they won't," Ron replied quickly, conviction in his voice as he rose to his feet; he was almost a head taller than Mr. Granger and was therefore forced to look down in order to meet the older man's gaze, and Ron didn't doubt the next words to come out of his mouth, which spilled out as if of their own accord: "It may've taken me a while to wise up, but I'm in love with your daughter; I reckon I've loved 'er for years even if I didn't realize it 'til recently. That thing with the potion made me realize a lot o'things about myself, actually, about what's important, and...and all I want is to do right by her—to make her happy."

He paused momentarily, his breathing labored as the heat rose to his ears before he blurted, "I didn't bloody ask for this to happen any more than she did. And—and I know I don't really deserve her, Mr. Granger; I know she could—I mean, she *will* do great things. Knowing Hermione, she won't let a little thing like being pregnant put a damper on her plans," he added with a chuckle, attempting to break the tension, but when Mr. Granger's face remained impassive the lopsided grin drained abruptly from Ron's features. "Look, I never meant for this...I never expected...but I want those babies. I wanna raise 'em with her. As a family—if she'll have me. I mean, we're still trying to figure out...well, *us*, but one day...I hope she'll want to...y'know... make things official."

His speech came to a rather abrupt halt, and his eyes flickered to the floor as that ballooning silence descended once more, and he couldn't figure which was worse: This, or his public break-up with Lavender outside of Divination. One thing he knew was that he'd be *really* happy when all the bloody speeches and explanations were out of the way.

"That's very noble of you, Ron," Mr. Granger finally said, his tone earnest. "And again I don't doubt your sincerity, but a boy your age can't possibly know what love truly is, and you can't possibly fathom the responsibility you're taking on—"

"With all due respect, sir," Ron cut in, trying his damndest to stifle his anger from boiling to the surface at being told how he did/didn't feel, "my mum and dad were married when they were

eighteen and with a baby on the way, and you know them—so I reckon you know they're still in love." Talking about his parents like that felt strange, but he didn't doubt what he was saying: His mum and dad demonstrated how much they loved each other every day by their words and actions. "They didn't need someone telling them what love is, what it feels like, and neither do me and Hermione." As he paused, he remembered some random bit of information that Hermione had once told him, which he hadn't paid much mind to at the time but which now seemed relevant: "Sides, the divorce rate in the magical world compared to the Muggle world—"

"To be perfectly honest," Mr. Granger interrupted, "while I'm admittedly not exactly thrilled by the circumstance of my teenage daughter having been impregnated, that's not the larger issue here. Jean didn't want me bringing this up tonight, but you've been truthful with me, Ronald, so I think it's only fair that I'm truthful with you as well: I think that Hermione should come home, get away from the magical world for a while." He allowed that to sink in before continuing: "Your world is in danger. I only have pieces of the puzzle, since no one, including my own daughter, has deemed it worth including me in on, but I'm no fool. Your world is in danger, and now my daughter is pregnant. You should therefore know that I'm planning on speaking with her about moving back home and attending university, at least until the threat has passed. Of course I'm not suggesting that you and your family can't have any involvement, Ron, but I have to think about the safety of *my* family—and Hermione is my family. She's our only child. I'm sure you can understand my position."

Ron stared at Mr. Granger, completely taken aback, the older man's words tumbling around inside his head: *I think that Hermione should come home, get away from the magical world for a while... Your world is in danger... She's our only child.* "I—I do understand," he finally stammered. "I understand that she's your daughter and that you want to protect her, but I also know Hermione, and I know she'll never agree to that." And she wouldn't: Hermione had confided in him that her parents had tried to convince her to come home before, but she wouldn't hear of it.

"Perhaps not," Hermione's dad said quietly, "but as her father it's my duty to try. And if you love her—and those unborn children—as much as you say you do and want what's best for them, I'd think that *you'd* want to do everything in your power to protect them as well. Just...think about it, son. I wouldn't dream of keeping them from you, but help me keep them safe. Please."

oOo

It was well past midnight when Hermione finally pulled on a dressing gown and poked her head into the hall, cautious of any telltale indications that her parents might still be up and about, but she heard nothing but the usual sounds of a sleeping household.

Her heart pounding, feeling like she was doing something exceedingly scandalous, she stepped out into the hall. *Honestly*, she chided herself, feeling ridiculous by the fact that she was resorting to sneaking around just to obtain some uninterrupted time with Ron; she was already pregnant, so she wasn't entirely certain what her father was worried about.

The words "death by intimacy" popped into her head unexpectedly, and she stifled an absurd giggle at the thought: While her parents weren't exactly "traditional" in many aspects—they'd let her stay over at Ron's during countless holidays over the years, hadn't they?—she had an idea that Dad had needed some convincing to let Ron stay over now that they were officially together and had already experienced physical intimacy at least once to his knowledge. Hermione imagined it to be a delicate topic for any father, the idea of a daughter being sexual, and she therefore couldn't help but feel a bit guilty for breaking his rules.

In all honesty, though, she was a bit peeved at him and feeling slightly rebellious as she cast a hasty Silencing Charm in the direction of the stairs before slinking quietly down the hall, knocking

purposefully on the door of the guest bedroom.

Ron been in a quiet sort of mood, barely uttering more than three words at a time since he and her dad had spoken alone in the study that evening. Even Ron's goodnight kiss two hours ago had seemed perfunctory, as if he'd been distracted, not really there—and Hermione was determined to find out exactly what Dad had said to him to put him in such a state.

"Ron?" she whispered through the door, pressing her ear against the wood when there was no response from the other side. She considered that perhaps he'd gone to sleep, even though he'd said that he planned on staying up to watch the telly—which Hermione had taken as a hint to come to him when she thought her parents were sleeping. Yet she considered now that she might have been mistaken, or else he'd simply been too knackered to stay awake.

She was in the process of deliberating over whether she should simply go inside and wake him or else wait to speak to him in the morning when—

"Hermione."

Wheeling around, she instinctively raised her wand, her free hand flying to her chest. "Ron! Don't sneak up on me like that," she hissed at him, being sure to keep her voice low as she lowered her wand once more. "I nearly hexed you!"

"Sorry," he said with a dry chuckle, one hand raised in mock-surrender. "Next time I'll announce my approach with a song and a dance, yeah?"

Only when her heart had stopped trying to beat its way out of her chest did she realize that he was wearing nothing but a white towel, clutched low on his hip with one hand, his hair was wet, and there was moisture gleaming on his skin; he'd clearly come straight from the shower, but how Hermione hadn't noticed the light beneath the bathroom door was completely beyond her.

"Wasn't expecting anyone to be awake," he added in apparent explanation as to why he wasn't clothed, his ears reddening noticeably when he brushed past her—she got a strong whiff of the clean scent of his soap coming off his skin—and pushed open the bedroom door.

The heat rising to her own cheeks and her heart stuttering nervously at his clean, masculine scent and his state of undress, she followed him into the room, automatically locking and warding the door while he watched on, his eyebrows quirked in evident curiosity and confusion.

"So..." Ron said, suddenly looking just as nervous as she felt as she turned to face him once more: He stood before her wearing nothing but that blasted towel, and the tension in the air between them suddenly sparked and sizzled, as tangible as the cotton of the thin towel that separated her line of sight from what lay beneath.

Only at that moment did Hermione realize how this looked, what Ron probably thought she came here for, since she hadn't even thought to let him dress before following him into the room...

She closed her eyes briefly, her breathing laboring as she envisioned him on top of her, his skin flushed with desire, the telling pleasure on his face indicative that he was on the very threshold of his release... When she opened them again, she thought she glimpsed a shadow of that very desire in his cerulean eyes, in the way he watched her expectantly, still clutching the towel to his hip with one hand.

She really *should* leave to let him dress, because he was far too distracting with his long, freckle-spattered limbs, his jutting hipbones, and that thin trail of course ginger hairs between said hipbones that disappeared beneath the towel...

It was suddenly far too hot in this smallish room, but she had to stay focused, remember what she came here for. "I'll just—I'll turn around so you can get dressed," she announced quite abruptly, feeling ridiculous as she turned to face the desk in the corner of the room.

"Hermione, it's not like you don't already know what I look like naked," he teased, evidently amused by her modesty after what they'd already done together, yet Hermione could tell that he was using humor to cover up his own blatant nervousness. When she heard what must've been the towel hitting the carpeted floor, her breathing hitched at the very idea that she was now locked inside a room with a very naked Ron Weasley.

"So what did my dad say to you?" she asked, ignoring his comment as she heard him rummaging around in his rucksack.

Ron didn't immediately answer as he dressed, so once the rustling of clothing had subsided she turned to face him again: He was perched on the edge of the bed wearing a pair of too-short pajama bottoms and a t-shirt with a hole in it, a pained expression on his face as he stared at the wall, clearly lost in thought.

"Ron, what is it?" she asked anxiously as she crossed the room and sat next to him, placing her hand on his knee; immediately, his much larger hand covered hers. "Whatever it is, you can tell me—"

"I think you should stay here. In the Muggle world, I mean. For a while. Until You-Know-Who's gone for good."

"Excuse me?" Surely he was joking, or else she'd simply misunderstood him, because there was no conceivable way that he'd just said what she thought he'd said.

"Look," he said, rubbing the back of his neck with his free hand as he turned to face her more fully, his knees bumping hers, "you and the babies, you're not safe—"

"Dad put you up to this," she interrupted accusatorily as she snatched her hand back, unable to believe that he'd been swayed by her father after a single conversation. "He's been using that line with me for years."

"But it's true, isn't it? Now more than ever. I mean, think about it, Hermione: I'm a blood traitor, and you're a Muggle-born—both known friends of Harry Potter's. Setting aside what could happen to *us*, what d'you think might happen to the babies if You-Know-Who comes to power?"

"We'll come up with a plan in that eventuality," she said reasonably, trying not to become irritated, to remember that Ron was just trying to protect her because he loved her. "In the meantime, there's no reason to assume that—"

"Yeah, but you'd be much better off if you just stayed here, outta the way. Better yet, take your parents and get outta the country. We could explain everything to them, I could help them understand how serious this is. And if the Death Eaters never know you're pregnant, then that's all the better. You could just disappear—"

"Ron, it's no secret that I'm pregnant," she cut in as she rose to her feet, planting her hands firmly on her hips as she rounded on him. "The children of Death Eaters go to Hogwarts, and, thanks to Romilda Vane, everyone knows! And they know that you're the father as well."

"Yeah, but we could—we could start a rumor that you...lost them or something—and I know how terrible that sounds," he added quickly as she opened her mouth to protest, "but at least you'd be safe. *They'd* be safe."

"Ron, this is insane!" she stated, her hands coming up to grip her hair in frustration as unexpected tears stung her eyes. "You're asking me to *disappear from my life*—to sit out the war—to abandon who I am and everyone that I love—to abandon *you*! If we were in imminent danger, I could understand, but this is premature—"

"Hermione, we *are* in imminent danger!" he protested as he rose to his feet as well. "You-Know-Who is bloody out there, isn't he, and this isn't a game to him! There've already been disappearances, so-called 'accidents' in the Muggle world... Should we just sit around and sodding wait for things to get worse, like last time he came to power? He *hates* Muggles and Muggle-borns, Hermione, and he's a raving, cold-hearted murderer—"

"Do you think I somehow don't know that, Ron? That's precisely why I have to stay in the Wizarding world—*where I belong*—because I can help, because I'm no use to anyone sitting on the sidelines, hiding out when I could be..."

Her voice trailed off as an abrupt, unexpected sensation of nausea rolled over her in an acute, sickening wave; she bent over and clutched her stomach as she waited for the bout to pass, willing herself not to become violently sick...

"*Hermione*—what is it? Is it the babies?"

After several moments she became aware that Ron's arm was around her, and his voice was laced with panic and completely lacking the anger and frustration of moments before.

"Just a bit of morning sickness," she assured him with a shaky laugh as the wave mercifully subsided, and she relaxed against him, feeling immensely relieved that she hadn't vomited. "Which is an entirely inaccurate name given I've had episodes at seemingly random times, but it hasn't been too awful so far."

He frowned down at her while absently rubbing circles on her upper arms with his thumbs: "D'you need anything? Some water or something?"

"There's some nausea potion in my bag. Let's go to my room..."

Minutes later, Hermione was tucked into her bed, sipping at the cool glass of water Ron had given her while he sat propped against the footboard, watching her, his long legs stretched out, crossed at the ankles, and nestled against her left leg. "Feel better?" he asked when she placed the half-emptied glass on the nightstand.

"Much, thank you," she said with a sincere smile, nudging his legs with hers and was rewarded by a wide grin of his own. "Thank you for taking care of me."

"Hey, it's my fault you're in this situation to begin with," he returned with a warm chuckle as he placed his hand over her duvet-covered foot, squeezing gently, "so I reckon taking care of you is the least I can do."

"Rubbish," she murmured sleepily as he pulled back the comforter at the end of the bed, freeing her feet; he then peeled off her socks and began kneading her insoles with both hands, one at a time. "You didn't force me to step on that potion bottle," she added as her eyes fluttered shut in pleasure at the magic his strong hands were working on her, especially when they slid up her calf beneath her pajama bottoms. "That was the result of my own carelessness...oh..."

He chuckled again as he switched to her other calf. "Yeah, but I was the one distracting you, remember?"

"Vividly. Although, I think I much prefer this method of distraction."

"Oh, yeah? Does this feel good, Hermione?" His voice was decidedly more gravelly than before, and she opened her eyes to find him gazing at her face intensely as he continued to massage her feet and calves; his expression caused her to shiver, a spike of feral desire blooming between her legs.

"Yes," she whispered, her voice hitching.

She hadn't forgotten about their heated argument in the guest bedroom minutes before, and it was something that they would have to finish discussing very soon, since Hermione was beyond disturbed by the idea that Ron wanted to send her away. (For that matter, she planned on having a serious talk with her father as well.) At the moment, however, her hormones were on overdrive, and she was having difficulty concentrating on anything but the feeling of Ron's large, talented hands on her skin.

"I can...I can touch you somewhere else...if you want," Ron whispered, his face flushed with obvious lust, intermingled with a touch of awkwardness/shyness, which Hermione found to be terribly endearing. "We don't have to—y'know—do *that* again if you're not ready, but...but I wanna make you feel good, Hermione. If that's all right. Just let me..." He swallowed visibly and licked his lips, his breathing as erratic as her own. "I wanna take care of you."

Their eyes met for another single, heated moment as he awaited her response, and she found herself nodding. "Yes," she breathed again.

The expression on his face suggesting that Christmas had come early, he crawled over to her—she didn't miss the way his erection tented his pajama bottoms—and pushed the duvet and sheets down as he nuzzled into her side. She turned to face him as he kissed her, her arms sliding around his neck while one of his palms slipped beneath her pajama top, his fingers splaying protectively over her belly.

He felt good, and Hermione couldn't help but snuggle into his warmth, his scent overwhelming her and invading her senses, and she was all too aware of the hard prod against her hip through their clothing. "What you said earlier this evening," she whispered a bit breathlessly as their lips broke apart, one hand sliding around to caress his unshaven jaw, "about me being pregnant by you being a turn-on...is that true?"

"What d'you think?" he breathed, rolling his hips and effectively grinding his erection against her. "You've got no idea how bad I want you again, Hermione... Just bloody thinking about it makes me horny as fuck..." Then he began unbuttoning her pajama top with trembling fingers, starting at the bottom and working his way up, planting tender, reverent kisses along her belly as her flesh was revealed. "So beautiful," he whispered once her breasts were bared before him, and he swooped down while pushing her top over her shoulders, kissing and licking his way over her plump mounds before suckling them one at a time, his hands coming up to alternate with his mouth, squeezing and plucking in a frenzied, lustful manner...

"Ron!" she gasped, her back arching of its own accord, her chest straining to give him better access as her fingers threaded not-so-gently in his hair; her hips rolled, seeking friction, only to realize that Ron had shifted between her legs at some point, and she felt him, right there, hard between her legs, and it felt good as she ground herself against him, *so good*...

Before she could truly enjoy it, however, he shifted again, sliding down her body while planting open-mouthed kisses and light nips to her abdomen and upper pelvis, his thumbs hooking beneath the waistband of her pajama bottoms. Hermione lifted her hips, assisting him as he pushed her knickers and bottoms over her bum and down her legs, pulling them from her ankles.

Once the cumbersome clothing articles were unceremoniously discarded, Ron leaned back over her as he settled once more between her splayed legs, his lips greedily seeking hers, tongues dueling passionately as his hand slipped between their bodies; Hermione cried out against his mouth, her hips thrusting against him as he slipped first one, then a second thick finger into her body, pumping them in and out of her...

"Fuck, Hermione, you're so fucking hot," he growled against her mouth while his other hand clumsily fondled her chest.

She was groaning and panting, his fingers quickening their pace, and he slid lower on the bed between her thighs. Her chest heaved, her fists gripping the sheets as she watched his head lower toward her core, and when his tongue darted out to swipe hungrily over her swollen, sensitive clitoris, her pleasure was pushed to the very pinnacle...

"Oh! Ron... Oh, God, *Ron*..."

His hand, tongue, and lips working her at a furious pace, she was sent pummeling over the precipice, her orgasm rocking her body from the inside out as the endorphins spiked in her bloodstream, his name a ragged, breathy litany on her lips...

After a small eternity, Hermione went limp against the mattress, feeling like nothing more than a mass of nerve endings and pure satiation.

When Ron climbed back up her body, a rather smug, self-satisfied expression on his adorable face, she snogged him senseless, one hand gripping the back of his neck while the other drifted beneath his t-shirt, exploring the soft, silky skin of his back before snaking around to his front; she felt the muscles of his lower abdomen ripple beneath her touch as she delved her hand inside his pants and began pumping him—which wiped that smug expression right off his face.

"Oh, *fuck*, 'Ermione," he groaned in surprise and pleasure, his head falling to her shoulder as he began thrusting instinctively into her palm, shifting his weight to her left side so as not to crush her.

She wasn't entirely certain what she was doing, as the entirety of her experience was contained to that hospital room a month ago, but she allowed instinct to guide her as she used her fingers to spread the wetness seeping from his thick tip over his shaft, making use of his natural lubrication as she pumped him.

Sensing that he was close by the whimpers escaping his lips and the trembling of his limbs, she swiftly used her other hand to push his pants and pajamas over his hips, freeing him completely: Though she'd seen him naked and fully erect before, she couldn't help but feel a bit overwhelmed by his size, as she'd been under the influence of that potion the last time she'd seen him...well, like *this*...and hadn't really had an opportunity to appreciate how...gifted he was.

Feeling ridiculously aroused by the look of utter pleasure and adulation on his face, Hermione swooped down on sudden impulse, kissing his tip and tasting his wetness, while her fist continued to ardently pump him. "Ahhh, fuck!" he bellowed as he immediately began to contract beneath her palm. "Uhhh...Er-my-nee...sweetheart..."

She worked him as he ejaculated all over her chest in long spurts, whimpers and nonsensical groans leaving his lips; she released him only when his pulsing had stopped, and Ron finally sagged against her, evidently spent.

"You didn't have to do that," he said a few moments later, after he'd cleaned her up, his voice a bit weak. "Don't get me wrong, it was bloody brilliant and all...but you didn't have to..."

She smiled as she cupped his face and kissed him sweetly. "Just like you didn't have to do what you did for *me*, but I did it because I love you and I wanted to."

His lopsided grin widened impossibly as he gazed down at her, that expression of adoration firmly affixed to his features. "Wicked."

She laughed as she slapped his arm, nudging at him to move off of her before scrounging around on the floor for her discarded knickers and pajama bottoms.

Once they were properly redressed with everything tucked back into place, they settled into one other's arms, facing each other. "You really *should* go back to your room," Hermione commented as she stifled a yawn, but she didn't really want him to go. "If we fell asleep and my dad found you here, it wouldn't be pleasant."

Ron was quiet, his expression pensive as he studied her. "Hermione," he began hesitantly, tucking a stray curl behind her ear, "about what we talked about before...I don't wanna row with you..."

"And I have no desire to row with *you*," she said gently, "but you can't just expect me to pack up and leave. I won't do it. Not as long as I can be of use and I'm not in any immediate danger."

"Yeah, I know," he replied reluctantly. "But I had to try. Your dad, he really loves you, y'know, and wants what's best for you, and so do I."

"I know," she whispered, swiping at the unexpected tears that rose to her eyes at Ron's heartfelt words. "I promise that I'm not going to take any unnecessary risks, Ron. But as long as Voldemort's out there...no one is safe. Not me, not my parents, not our children. Do you understand? If he comes to power, it's not just the magical world that'll be affected. As you pointed out, he's already taking out Muggles for the fun of it, and the majority of his destruction may be contained to Great Britain for now, but eventually it's doubtful that there'll be any corner of the world, magical or Muggle, left untouched by him. No one's safe, not until he's gone. And I've got to help Harry. *We've* got to do everything in our power to help Harry, for the sake of our children."

"You're right," he whispered with a smile. "You're too fucking brilliant for your own good, you know that? But what if he *does* come to power, Hermione?"

"Then...we'll do what we must. We'll come up with a plan—a good, solid plan, all right?"

He nodded, clearly placated as he kissed her again, his hand lingering on her cheek. "I really fucking love you, you know that."

She grinned, her heart swelling a hundredfold. "And I love you. I really do."

"You *fucking* love me, right?"

She giggled, feeling unaccountably shy. "You're actually going to make me say it, aren't you? Yes, I really fucking love you, Ron."

Ron grinned so widely he looked as if his face might split in half, and then he let out an accompanying chuckle, as if her cursing was the height of hilarity.

"Oh, shut it, you big oaf."

"What? I can't help it if it's cute, curse words coming from your prim and proper little mouth. Ten points from Gryffindor, Ms. Granger, for being naughty."

"Oh, you have no idea exactly how naughty I can be...Professor."

Ron guffawed at that, rolling onto his back and pulling her into the crook of his arm. "Is that a fact, now, Ms. Granger?"

"Indeed, it is."

He pulled her in close, kissing the top of her head. "Shoulda known that'd be some barny fantasy o'yours, seducing the teacher... I'll have to keep that in mind for future reference."

"Oh, honestly, don't be so ridiculous," she protested with a roll of her eyes, but the heat in her cheeks was undeniable.

Ron and Hermione carried on like that for several more minutes, their responses to each other becoming fewer and further between, until there was no sound to be heard between them but their snores as her head rested peacefully on his chest...

Chapter 23: Ravenous

Chapter Twenty-Three: Ravenous

oOo

This chapter is set between HBP Chapter Twenty: Lord Voldemort's Request and Chapter Twenty-One: The Unknowable Room.

oOo

The next few days proved to be pleasant enough, despite the lingering tension in the air marked by the day following Ron and Hermione's arrival at her family home: Hermione rowed heatedly with her father that day—something she rarely did, which made it all the more upsetting for all involved—while Jean attempted to mediate between her feuding husband and daughter.

Ron, for his part, stood silently by, hands shoved deeply in his pockets, jaw set, unsure what he should say or do. At one point he attempted to intervene when it was obvious that Hermione was close to tears, but she effectively silenced him with a stony glare, and, Merlin, if looks could kill...

After that he didn't dare utter a word.

Eventually, at Jean's gentle and reasonable urging, Hermione and Mr. Granger came to a ceasefire, both parties agreeing to set aside their arms and draw a truce for the time being. Ron knew that, when it was all said and done, what Hermione chose to do—whether to stay in the Muggle world or the magical—was ultimately her own decision, and no amount of arguing and reasoning on Mr. Granger's part would change that.

But, again, Ron didn't dare offer his opinion on the matter after Hermione's death-glare.

oOo

The next day the clouds and the rain that had been gripping the country miraculously decided to recede for the first time in recorded history—or at least for the first time that spring—giving way to a lovely, crisp cobalt sky and the first budding wildflowers in the garden. After a simple breakfast of fresh fruit and some croissants and marmalade from the neighborhood bakery, she found herself back up in her room, gazing at her wardrobe of pretty, boutique dresses that her mother insisted on purchasing for her, despite the fact that Hermione was low-maintenance and practical above all else; she had made her opinion quite clear on numerous occasions concerning trite, inconsequential things such as fashion.

All the same, her mother was the closest thing she had to a girlfriend—other than Ginny, who, despite her easy beauty, wasn't very "girly" herself—and Hermione wanted to make her happy: Although Jean Granger had officially taken her husband's side during the debate, she had nevertheless reminded him that it was ultimately Hermione's decision to make; not to mention, Mum was the one who'd insisted on a cessation of hostilities.

Furthermore, this morning she was going on her first real date with Ron, and although it would consist of a simple walk and a picnic in a nearby park, she admitted to herself that she wanted to look nice.

Quite simply, she wanted to please him. Was that so wrong?

As she pulled out the most basic dress she could find and paired it with a designer denim jacket,

she pondered how so much had changed in a little over a month: Had it really just been a matter of weeks since she'd spent her free time hiding in the library and refusing to speak to Ron? That he'd consistently and nauseatingly allowed Lavender Brown to grind herself all over him in the common room?

Unease stirred in the pit of her stomach at that thought.

Despite all that they'd discussed and the considerable effort Ron had made in the past weeks to prove his loyalty to her, she couldn't help but experience the smallest seed of doubt; that seed poisoned her thoughts, made her question whether Ron might, given the right set of circumstances, change his mind yet.

Silently, she dressed and studied the result in the mirror: Even in a pretty dress she was nothing more than plain-Jane Hermione, with too-skinny legs and knobby knees, and it was difficult to imagine how Ron could possibly want her. Although she hadn't been buck-toothed since the age of fifteen, she was downright...unappealing compared to the likes of Lavender Brown and Fleur Delacour—and her hair was an atrocity all its own.

Regardless of everything Ron had said to her in the hospital wing following his poisoning, she had quite a bit of difficulty convincing herself that he'd really want to be with her if it wasn't for the pregnancy. *Know-it-all. Bookworm. Close-minded. Not fun. Not cool. Not particularly pretty.* She was very aware of what people said about her.

Now she might as well add "desperate, boyfriend-stealing nutter" to the list, since that's what everyone was saying about her these days. The worst of the rumors that she'd attempted to ignore claimed that she'd seduced Ron, possibly even drugged him or gotten him intoxicated—or even *paid* him—and deliberately became pregnant by him. On a similar note, some speculation had even cropped up recently that Hermione had actually paid Cormac McLaggen to take her to Slughorn's Christmas party back in December.

Apparently she was some sort of Quidditch "groupie" who specialized in Keepers and would do anything—absolutely anything—to snag one.

While undeniably disgusting, the rumors she could dismiss as utter rubbish perpetuated by Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, and the like, but she couldn't shake the idea that maybe Ron would one day realize—

Stop it! she ordered herself before she could complete that thought, knowing full well that she was letting her own insecurities cause her to doubt herself and Ron's feelings for her—which wasn't at all fair to Ron. After all, he'd made a true effort at growing up this last month alone, and when she looked into his eyes she saw nothing but sincerity and love.

She chocked up her renewed doubts to the fact that she hadn't been sleeping well lately: Her sleep had been disturbed, interrupted by nightmarish dreams of Death Eaters, Voldemort, and distorted, nonsensical flashes of the Department of Mysteries—the latter undoubtedly the result of what had happened just before the previous summer—and Bellatrix Lestrange's snarling, smirking, cackling face.

Amidst it all, a crying baby could be heard echoing through the corridors of the Department of Mysteries, its thin wails becoming weaker and more pathetic still...

As Hermione slid her freshly-painted toes—her mother had painted them last night while her dad and Ron watched the telly after dinner—into a pair of strappy sandals, she recalled reading that many women have reported experiencing nightmares during pregnancy, which was theorized to be resultant of the normal stresses of impending motherhood—and her situation certainly exceeded

the boundaries of what could be considered "normal."

She would be lying to herself if she tried to pretend that her parents and Ron didn't have a valid concern, even if she also felt that they were being hasty and overprotective: She was worried about Voldemort herself, she couldn't deny it. Yet she had always prided herself on her sharp logic and rationalization, and she was of the opinion that fretting about it and making rash decisions would be counterproductive.

It was each witch or wizard's duty to be proactive, to do his or her individual part to prevent the corruption and take-over of their government and consequently their world—and Hermione was certainly no exception. Retreat was simply not an option if they were to prove victorious in the ever-looming war—or if they were to prevent a war from happening in the first place. Which, of course, would be the preferable outcome: to find and defeat Voldemort before he had the opportunity to cause any more damage than he already had.

When she returned to Hogwarts next week she would insist that Harry redouble his efforts to retrieve that memory from Professor Slughorn, and she vowed that she would continue her search for the ever-elusive information concerning Horcruxes. After all, if Professor Dumbledore deemed it important, then Hermione didn't doubt that it was.

In the meantime, she would come up with an airtight "evacuation plan" for her parents and children in the event that Voldemort should overthrow the Ministry or become an imminent danger; she would begin preparations for that tonight, actually.

And if he came to power before she'd given birth... Well, Hermione wasn't foolish. She would have no choice but to accompany her parents into hiding.

After hastily applying mascara to her sparse, practically non-existent eyelashes and putting some color on her lips, she stood in front of the full-length mirror behind her bathroom door once more, turning sideways and observing her still-flat stomach: She wasn't quite six weeks along, yet by the time she began her final year at Hogwarts on the first of September—assuming the board of governors hadn't shut down the school by then—she presumed she would be approximately the size and shape of a small blimp.

She frowned.

She and Ron had yet to be informed of the details of the "special allowances" that would be made for them next term, so she could only assume that their situation had been pushed, understandably, to the backburner because of more immediate, pressing issues.

Although she had no concrete reason to think so, Hermione couldn't shake the ominous feeling that, whether because of Voldemort or the board of governors or something else entirely, she wouldn't be returning to Hogwarts next term.

oOo

Ron couldn't stop sneaking glances at her as they walked along the pavement hand-in-hand, a feat that proved a bit tricky due to their height difference. It was unusually nice out on this midmorning in early April, and he was in high spirits and feeling in awe of the fact that Hermione was really, truly his. He reckoned he should've been nervous, what with this being their first real date and all, but this was *Hermione*, wasn't it?

Over the years they'd spent quite a lot of time together, in good times and bad, and Ron reckoned that he knew her about as well as he could possibly know anyone. He was just happy to be able to spend some time alone with her, doing things that normal couples were supposed to do, like taking

walks and stuff. He'd never taken a walk with Lavender. (Not that he'd particularly wanted to.) Sure, they'd dragged each other off to look for hidden alcoves and broom cupboards, but it was different with Hermione. A *lot* different.

This was...nice. And she looked really...well, pretty in a light blue dress that showed off her subtle curves and a jean jacket: He couldn't stop himself from glancing at her smooth, toned legs and the V of her dress, where the top swell of her breasts was just visible. And while she hadn't straightened out her hair like she usually did when she dressed up, it was somehow tamer, softer-looking, and pinned up at the sides with some decorative butterfly combs that Ron guessed belonged to her mother.

More than pretty, she was beautiful. Okay, who the hell was he kidding anyway? His girlfriend was fucking hot.

Not that he hadn't *always* found Hermione hot, mind you. He'd always thought she was pretty, even before she'd gotten her teeth fixed, but he couldn't help but notice in the last couple of years that she'd somehow gotten extra pretty without even trying, especially when she fixed herself up like she had today, and she'd filled out nicely—and Ron knew he wasn't the only bloke that noticed.

He'd wanted to bloody rip that ape McLaggen's arms out of his sockets, the way he'd looked at her. And once, the previous term before she'd decided that she hated Ron's guts, Hermione had stuck her head in the door of his dormitory late in the evening to ask him if he'd remembered to revise his Defense essay. She'd clearly been fresh out of the shower, what with her damp hair and pajamas, and Ron couldn't help but notice Seamus clearly eyeing her with that shark-like look in his eyes that he reserved for potential conquests. After she'd left, the fucker had even made a comment about if Ron didn't "do her soon" that he'd beat him to the punch. "Just fair warning," Seamus had added with a roguish smirk as he pulled his curtains closed around his bed.

Ron had stewed in blinding anger, deliberating on whether or not he should rip the curtains open and beat his dorm mate to a bleeding pulp.

He'd always liked Seamus and had been somewhat in awe—and a bit jealous—of all the action that the bloke seemed to be getting, but he'd crossed a line by even bloody daring to *think* about Hermione like that. She was off-limits, and Ron had thought that that fact had been understood between them. (The thought of Seamus touching *his* Hermione like one of his common tarts made Ron fucking sick.)

Just as he'd lost the battle with his driving impulse and had taken a step toward the git's bed, he'd felt a hand close on his shoulder. "Don't," Harry had said in a low voice. "It's not worth getting expelled over."

"What, you mean Hermione's honor isn't worth it?"

Harry had the decency to look sheepish, but then he said, in what he undoubtedly believed to be a reasonable tone, "Hermione wouldn't think so, no."

Ron had glared at his best mate, all the fury that had been directed at Seamus moments before now turned on Harry: "Sod it," he'd muttered after several pregnant heartbeats, feeling mutinous, as he'd turned and barricaded himself behind his own curtains.

He'd wanked himself stupid that night to thoughts of peeling Hermione's yellow pajama bottoms off, draping one of her legs over his shoulder, and shagging her against the dormitory wall. He'd felt guilty, knowing that he was doing the exact thing that he'd gotten hacked at Seamus about—lusting after Hermione—but it was different, wasn't it? He loved her; he didn't wanna just *use* her

and be done with her like she was some sorta disposable rubbish.

In the present, Ron felt a bit guilty, knowing that he'd used Lavender like *she* was disposable rubbish—he hadn't meant to, but there you have it—and there wasn't anything he could do about that now. He'd apologized to her, and whether she accepted it or not, he'd meant it: He really was sorry.

Pushing those uncomfortable thoughts aside, Ron couldn't resist puffing out his chest with pride as they passed a group of Muggle blokes in the park playing some sort of sport with sticks and balls. He let go of Hermione's hand, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and tucking her into his side in a gesture that clearly stated, "Fuck yeah, she's with me."

Hermione smiled up at him, clearly pleased, and he responded by leaning down and tenderly brushing her lips with his. He loved that he could do that now—kiss her whenever he bloody wanted.

"Here, this is perfect," Hermione said suddenly as she clutched his arm and lead him toward the bank of a glittering pond, choosing a spot behind a large oak out of viewing range of the sweating Muggle blokes. Across the pond, other couples and families were scattered here and there, evidently taking advantage of the break in the bad weather.

"Whatever you want," he replied cheerfully, feeling amenable, not really caring where they ate as long as they ate.

After he'd retrieved the blanket from his rucksack and spread it out over a grassy spot in the shade of the tree, Hermione set out their lunch spread, which consisted of sandwiches, salad, fruit leftover from breakfast, and a couple of "Cokes," as she said they were called.

"This is a bird's meal," he mock-complained around a mouth full of ham-and-cheese on some good bakery bread, washing it back with the fizzy Muggle drink—which he rather liked, actually. He'd have to remember to ask Hermione where he could get some more of the stuff before they went back to school.

"Well, no one's forcing you to eat it," she said with a good-natured laugh, and Ron couldn't help but marvel over this new dynamic in their relationship: Before they'd gotten together, Hermione would've bitten his head off for that comment. Well, depending on her mood, anyway. But she'd definitely snapped at him for less, that was for bloody sure.

Wicked. He wondered what else he could get away with that he couldn't before...

"Food's food, innit?" he finally said with a shrug, taking another enormous bite and finishing off the sandwich. He then licked his fingers clean before chugging the remainder of his drink.

Hermione rolled her eyes as she took a dainty bite of salad and dabbed her lips with a cloth napkin. "I see your manners haven't improved any."

"Since when? Breakfast?"

"You could at least *try*, you know, since this is our first date and all."

Despite her words, her tone remained good-humored, so he reckoned a little ribbing would be safe: "What for? Isn't the point of a date so two people can to get to know each other? Find out if the other person has...an extra toe or something...so they can chuck 'em before they end up married with mutant babies?" He grabbed her foot suddenly, pulling it into his lap and peeling off her sandals one at a time. "Well, I'm counting ten toes here, five on each foot, so it's a safe bet we're not having mutant babies... Wait, what were we talking about again?"

Hermione laughed, and then sighed as he began rubbing her feet, just as he had the other night: He'd filed away the fact that foot rubs led to getting off. And getting off with her was something he was gagging to do again. It had been two days, and all he could think about was Hermione dipping her head toward his dick, her pretty little mouth touching him there...

"All I'm saying," Hermione said, interrupting his dirty thoughts, her eyes fluttering closed momentarily as he kneaded her insole, "is that you could try employing a bit more...refinement than usual, put in a bit of effort. Try to impress me with your...gentlemanly charms."

And she actually managed to say that with a straight face.

"Yeah, but, Hermione, that wouldn't be very honest o'me, would it? I mean, this is me, the real-deal, sweetheart. Faking manners would just be...well, deceitful, wouldn't it? Give you...false expectations or something."

"Oh, honestly, I just meant—oh, never mind."

Ron guffawed at the mingled exasperation and pleasure on her face, and Hermione couldn't stop herself from laughing along with him in spite of herself.

"You're such a prat, Ron Weasley."

"Yeah, but I'm a prat with talented hands, right?" As he graced her with his most impish lopsided grin, he leaned forward and ran his palms up her smooth, silky legs, pausing just beneath the hemline of her dress as he watched her face flush.

"Ron...", she breathed as she glanced about nervously, even as her chest rapidly rose and fell in obvious excitement. "We can't... We—we're in a public park."

He sighed in resignation, sliding up next to her against the tree trunk and wrapping one arm protectively around her waist as he nuzzled his face into the crook of her neck: She smelled so fucking sweet. Her smell was something that was now branded permanently into his memory. "I know," he whispered, kissing her throat lightly and eliciting a shiver from her. After a lingering moment he confessed, "I'm just... I'm so fucking horny, Hermione." So much for refinement.

"Ron!"

"Sorry!" he said with a laugh as he attempted to discreetly adjust himself in his pants and tear his eyes away from her cleavage—and they promptly landed on her bare legs. He straightened up next to her, looking out across the pond in an attempt to distract himself and momentarily watched two small children feeding the ducks. "All right, let's talk about something else. I have a question, actually, something I've been wondering since you set me up in the guest room..."

"What's that?"

"What exactly is the purpose of a computer? What does it do?"

"Oh. Well, it's for storing information and calculating—"

"But how does information get in there?"

"Well, you can either type information into a document through the keyboard, upload it using a disc, or you can download it from the internet—"

"Inter-what?"

When she laughed, he feigned offense: "What? How am I supposed to know about Muggle things, Hermione?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not making fun of you, I just... It's such a commonplace thing in the Muggle world that I forget... Never mind. The internet, it's...think of it as an invisible world where people can connect with each other through the computer."

He stared at her in incredulity: "An invisible *world*?"

She clearly became flustered by her own inability to adequately explain it, and he couldn't help but find her frustration somewhat entertaining.

"Well, it's not *really* a 'world,' per se, but a connection between computers, sort of like how phones are connected, with wires and—"

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"I know what the internet is. Dean explained it to me a couple o'years ago when he was telling me about... Anyway, point is, I'm only taking the piss."

"Oh, you are so—*Ron!*"

By that point he'd slumped to his back on the blanket and was guffawing so hard that his ribs hurt a bit. "You're too easy, Hermione," he managed to croak out once he'd calmed down sufficiently enough to speak.

"Are you quite finished?" Despite her annoyed tone, she couldn't stop the corners of her lips from tugging up ever-so-slightly in amusement. "I'm so getting you back when you least expect it, Ron Weasley."

In response, he scooted closer to her, resting his head across her thighs as he gazed up at her, a mischievous grin still playing on his lips. "Is that so, Hermione Granger?"

"It is." She smiled coyly as her hand drifted up automatically, brushing his fringe from his forehead. This time it was his eyes that fluttered shut in pleasure as her fingernails lightly scraped his scalp.

"Well, I hope you come up with something extra-naughty."

She smacked his arm. "Honestly, is sex all you think about?"

"Dunno. Maybe. Wait, no—food makes an occasional appearance in my thoughts."

After a few more minutes of light bantering, a comfortable silence settled between them, and Ron rolled onto his side, splaying his right hand over her belly as Hermione ran her fingers lovingly through his hair. There was a cool—but not uncomfortably so—breeze in the air, and he felt sleepy and content as he daydreamed about the day in the near future when he'd be able to feel his children's movements in her belly. He daydreamed about the day that he'd be able to hold them in his arms, tiny beings that were part him and part Hermione.

He tried not to think about Voldemort, but it was hard for Ron to picture the future without that sadistic fuck casting a bleak shadow over everything good.

He tried not to worry about the decision that Hermione was making to return to the Wizarding

world; all he could do was trust her judgment and do his damndest to protect her, should the need arise.

His eyes drifting open, he studied the way the midday sun shining through the leaves cast a brilliant glow on her skin while she gazed off slightly to her left, clearly lost in thought; her fingers stilled their movement in his hair, but she hadn't yet noticed that he was watching her. There was a slight crease between her eyes, and it was only then that Ron noticed the dark patches beneath her eyes, which she'd attempted to conceal with make-up.

"Hey, whatcha thinking about?" he asked, his voice thick with his lethargy.

She smiled down at him reassuringly. "I didn't sleep very well last night. Or the night before."

"That first night when we fell asleep together I noticed you tossing and turning." He sat up next to her, turning to face her. "I meant to ask you about it. Nightmares?"

"Something like that," she confessed as she bit her lower lip. "Mostly the dreams have to do with what happened at the Ministry last year... I keep seeing Bellatrix Lestrange. She laughs at me, taunts me."

"That's a bit strange, isn't it? To suddenly start dreaming about that after all these months?"

"Perhaps not. It was a traumatic event, and I read that vivid dreams and nightmares can be a pregnancy symptom." She smiled then, adding, "At any rate, it's not anything to be too concerned about. According to Mum I should start sleeping fifteen hours a night any day now."

"I gotta tell you," Ron retorted wryly, a grin of his own spreading across his face, "if *I* suddenly started dreaming about that Lestrange hag I'd check myself into St. Mungo's straight away 'cause I'd be convinced I'd gone around the twist."

Hermione let out a small laugh at that.

"Seriously, though," he murmured, reaching out to gently cup her cheek, "if it doesn't get better soon, maybe you should take some Dreamless Sleep or something."

She nodded, again biting her lower lip as she leaned into his touch. "I'll definitely consider—"

Without any prior warning, it abruptly began to rain, fat droplets landing intermittently on their heads and limbs. "Well, I reckon a rain check's in order," Ron commented as they hurriedly packed away the remnants of their picnic. By the time he'd managed to shove the blanket back into his rucksack and they began jogging, hand-in-hand, back to where Hermione had parked the car, the clouds had already rolled in and the rain was coming down in an unremitting torrent.

oOo

As Ron hastily stuffed their belongings into the trunk of her silver Lexus—her seventeenth birthday present from Mum and Dad—Hermione moved quickly around the car. Just as she'd reached the driver-side door, her sandals unexpectedly slipped in a puddle, her feet sliding out from under her; a strong pair of familiar arms abruptly wrapped around her waist from behind, steadying her before she could land hard on her bum in the mud.

"Thank you, R—"

She never completed that thought.

Inexplicably, she found herself being whirled around before she was firmly pinned between the

car and Ron; as she looked up in bewilderment, she found that his clothing was as drenched as her own, and his hair was matted to his head. Most notably, however, he was gazing down at her with the most intensely feral, passionate expression she'd ever witnessed in her life.

A heated moment, chocked full of anticipation and desire, passed between them as their eyes remained locked on each other, and he lifted one hand, tracing her lips reverently with his thumb while she watched his lust-clouded gaze fall to her mouth; her heart was making a rather fine attempt to beat itself right out of her chest.

She was now completely unaware of the chill rain that continued to deluge them or of the fact that there were other people scattered here or there in the car park, attempting to escape the rain, as her full attention was utterly captivated by the boy that had her pinned against her car, the boy that she loved. The boy that she wanted, in every manner possible.

Was this a logical thing that she was feeling? By all accounts, no. According to the books on science and chemistry that she'd read, romantic love was a chemical reaction, its sole purpose, like lust, in all probability to ensure the perpetuation of the human race.

Did that knowledge somehow lessen the intensity of what she was feeling and make her reconsider?

No, not at all. Against all logic and reason, she *wanted* to feel this way. She wanted everything that Ron had to offer her, and which he was evidently so willing to give.

Hermione swallowed hard, her breathing hitching in her keen eagerness to discover what he'd do next, and he didn't disappoint: His lips finally crashed down hungrily on hers, so hungrily, and she found that she was so unimaginably ravenous for him as well—and she didn't hold back.

Teeth nipped, lips sucked, and tongues sought, completely uninhibited, while their lower bodies melded together; he was stiff and insistent against her belly through his jeans, as one of his hands braced against the metal frame of the car, above her head, his other running up her outer thigh and bunching her dress up as he kneaded her bum almost roughly.

His hand abruptly hooked beneath her knee, yanking her leg up around his thigh, but he was too tall for them to rub together without completely lifting her from the ground.

"I want you so bad, Hermione," he whispered shakily as their lips broke apart and he pressed his forehead against hers; there was a desperation in his voice that left her staggered: More than his words, the wanting in his tone left her body feeling like a limp noodle and her insides feeling like mush.

The sharp ache of longing between her legs practically throbbed in time to the beat of her heart.

As he groaned and nipped her throat hard enough that she knew he'd marked her, her eyes flew open when she very suddenly remembered their public surroundings. She could no longer see anyone in the nearby vicinity, but the rain was now coming down harder than ever, and they were both drenched and chilled to the bone: Only at that moment did she realize that she was shivering so violently that her teeth were chattering, and it only had partly to do with the effect that Ron was having on her.

"Ron...let's get out of here. Now. My parents...they won't be home for several hours."

Chapter 24: Compromise

Chapter Twenty-Four: Compromise

oOo

This chapter is set between HBP Chapter Twenty: Lord Voldemort's Request and Chapter Twenty-One: The Unknowable Room.

oOo

Hermione had quite a bit of trouble concentrating on the drive home due to the fact that Ron's large, warm palm had settled territorially on her thigh, squeezing gently as it eased upward, and his mouth was latched to her neck, his ministrations driving her a bit mad with desire, if truth be told—and her concentration wasn't made easier by the continued torrential downpour.

It was somewhat difficult to believe that just minutes ago it had been a perfectly clear spring day, and she and Ron had been innocently—or perhaps slightly less-than-innocently—enjoying their real first date, and then the storm had unexpectedly descended, both literally and figuratively speaking.

"Ron." His name came out in a pant as she twisted away from him slightly when his fingertips brushed her damp knicker-clad core, her hips nearly jumping up off the seat in response; she was absurdly torn between lust and agitation: His behavior was less-than-gentlemanly, but she found that she didn't mind. (Quite the contrary, she was quite turned on by his reckless urgency.) However, they wouldn't have the opportunity to consummate their desires if she ended up driving headfirst into a tree or an oncoming vehicle. "If you want to make it back to my house in one piece, then I suggest you let me concentrate on the road."

"Sorry." He let out a nervous laugh as he wrenched himself away from her with an obvious effort, his lips reluctantly unlatching from her throat. She risked a glance at him, watching as he took a deep, calming breath and adjusted himself in his trousers, his eyes squinting at the windshield. "You're just so..."—he licked his full lips—"You're really...and I'm...bloody hell."

Her breathing became impossibly more erratic at the sentiment she knew that he was attempting so ineloquently to convey.

"I know." It really did feel good, the thought that Ron not only loved her but wanted her so badly that he couldn't seem to keep his hands off of her, or to even form a coherent sentence. "I feel the same way." As far as she was concerned, they couldn't get home quickly enough.

He really was beautiful to her, what with his scraggly hair still damp from the rain and curling around his collar, and she couldn't help but notice the way his bicep strained, the tendons of his forearm protruding as he gripped the handle at the top of the door: While he wasn't overly muscular he'd certainly filled out in the last year or so, and she couldn't help but appreciate his physique.

A charged silence descended between them as they both stared straight ahead, the back-and-forth swishing of the windshield wipers and their breathing the only sounds in the cab. The tension in the air between them was palpable, yet it was diminished somewhat by Ron's blatant nervousness as the rain thickened, rendering visibility practically nonexistent.

Hermione slowed the car down to a virtual crawl, making a genuine effort to concentrate on the

road rather than on Ron.

"How can you even see where you're going?" he asked suddenly.

Glancing at him once more, she saw that his eyes were still glued to the road, his jaw was set, and his right hand clutched the seat next to his thigh in a white-knuckled grip.

"Don't worry, I'm a safe driver," she assured him. "We'll be fine, I promise."

"If you say so." His tone heavily implied that he wasn't convinced.

"What, you don't trust me?" She couldn't prevent a small, teasing smile from forming on her lips.

"It's the *other* drivers I don't trust," he replied grimly. "All those barmy Muggles on the road..."

"Not all Muggles are barmy, Ron."

"I know that." She could practically hear his ears burning. "I mean, your mum and dad are all right. I just meant...you know..."

"People like Harry's aunt and uncle? I suppose it would come as a surprise to you to know that they're the exceptions rather than the rules? There are 'barmy' people everywhere, Ron—not just in the Muggle world: Look at the Malfoys, and Bellatrix Lestrange..."

"I know that," he repeated a bit too loudly. "Blimey, Hermione, I didn't mean... I just meant—"

"Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm only taking the piss. Remember what I said about getting you back? Honestly, you're too easy sometimes."

He stared at her for a moment with an expression that suggested that *she'd* gone barmy, but then he broke into a chortle: "Bloody hell, woman, just when I thought I couldn't find you any more mental than I already do...or hotter, for that matter..."

She couldn't help but grin widely, aware that she shouldn't be so pleased at being called "mental," but she understood that he meant it as a compliment.

Before she had the opportunity to contemplate the matter further, she steered the car into her parents' driveway, feeling simultaneously relieved to be off the streets and out of the storm, and nervous about the prospect of being alone with Ron in the house.

She was both nervous and excited about what she'd implied that they go home to do. *My parents...they won't be home for several hours*, she'd told him.

What exactly were her intentions? Was she really planning to have sex with him?

They'd already had intercourse, certainly—without a choice in the matter, at that—but that didn't seem to be an adequate reason to do it again, did it? On the other hand, every molecule in her body craved him on a purely animalistic level and demanded that she have him again.

It was only natural, of course. Human beings were innately sexual, and Hermione was no exception.

Once she'd pulled into the garage and turned off the ignition, she merely sat there staring at the

scattered raindrops on the windshield, her heart beating a rapid tattoo in her chest and her head a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions as she waited for Ron to say or do something, anything...

Finally, she turned to look at him at the exact moment that he turned to face her: Their eyes met for a fraction of a second, and in that single heated instant her prior doubts of moments before faded away, lost in a pool of deepest cerulean blue.

They crashed together desperately, fingers entangling in hair as lips and tongues sought and tasted and explored in a clumsy but frantic manner; before Hermione even had an opportunity to register what she was doing, she was straddling him in the passenger seat, her tongue thrusting in his mouth as she ground herself against the blatant bulge in his jeans.

"Fuck, 'Ermione," Ron groaned when their mouths parted, as her hips gyrated against him, and he reached up, squeezing her breasts through her dress, the heavy-lidded expression on his face as he gazed up at her suggesting reverence—and she couldn't help but wonder for about the millionth time how she appeared to him. She didn't view herself as being "sexy" or "desirable," yet the look on his face couldn't be fabricated or mistaken.

Experiencing a rush of confidence that she wasn't accustomed to feeling, Hermione swooped down and cupped his face with both hands while nipping his lower lip aggressively, and he literally growled—*growled!*—as he grabbed her hips and thrust upward in a frenzy of lust, generating more friction between them—

"Ron! I'm going to...oh...!"

"Yeah, fuck, that's hot," he growled as he continued to slam her hips up and down over his erection through his jeans, rubbing her in just the right spot. "Cum all over me, sweetheart, that's right...so beautiful..."

She buried her face in the crook of his scratchy neck as she climaxed against him, *hard*, one of his hands buried in her hair at the base of her scalp as he whispered into her ear soothingly, expressing his love for her, the sentiments punctuated by profanities that she found she didn't mind in the slightest.

When her body at last stilled its pleasurable shuddering, she became very aware of the fact that he was still unsatisfied and rock-hard beneath her; she was just reaching for his belt buckle, eager to reciprocate, when—

Tap, tap, tap.

Jean Granger was staring at them through the driver's side window, her hair wet and her arms laden with grocery bags.

"Fucking hell," Ron groaned as Hermione, red-faced and mortified, scooted off of him and clamored through the passenger-side door.

It was only then that Hermione realized that her mother had parked behind them, just outside the opened garage; she hadn't noticed because she'd been...well, rather occupied.

"You know, we've really got to stop meeting this way," Mum said casually as she shifted a paper sack to her free arm, her eyebrows quirked in apparent amusement. "I'd ask you if you were being safe, but clearly that ship has sailed. Hey, Romeo," she addressed Ron, "I've invited your parents over for dinner. Be a doll and help me out with the groceries, won't you?"

oOo

"What do you think of 'Albert' for a boy?"

Ron and Hermione were sitting at the kitchen table three hours later, a pile of baby name books in front of them, while Jean went to her office to do some Muggle business or other at her computer.

He hadn't exactly been too thrilled when Hermione had initially presented him with the stack of books that her mother had gotten from the local Muggle library and suggested they start looking at names, but, to his own surprise, he found that he didn't mind it too much. It was sorta fun, actually.

Well, at least it *had* been up 'til he realized that they couldn't agree on a single damn name.

"You're joking. Tell me you're bloody joking."

She looked up at him over the thick text that put *Hogwarts, a History* to shame, clearly offended. "And what exactly is wrong with 'Albert,' may I ask?"

"Gee, I dunno, everything? Look, Hermione, no kid o'mine is gonna be called 'Albert Weasley.'" He knew he was being a prat, but he couldn't seem to help himself: She was picking out the barmiest names, wasn't she?

She huffed up, looking indignant: "'Albert' happens to be my paternal grandfather's name, I'll thank you very much, and who says their last name will be 'Weasley,' anyway? I was actually thinking about 'Granger-Weasley' with a hyphen."

"'Albert Granger-Weasley,'" he said aloud as he stared at her like she'd grown a second head. "Yeah, like *that* wouldn't get 'im beat up in school."

"It's a strong, handsome name," she countered defensively. "All right, then, do you have any suggestions of your own? Or would you rather just moan about the names that I choose and be completely unhelpful?"

"Well, I've been thinking about girl names, and I kinda like 'Gemma' and 'Gillian.'" He cringed, waiting for her to shoot him down, much like he had her. To his surprise, however, she giggled and reached out across the table, prying the book from his hands.

"That's 'Gemma' and 'Gillian' with a 'j'-sound," she corrected, peering down at the page that he'd gotten the names from.

"Then why's it start with a bloody 'g'?" he returned, his ears heating up in embarrassment.

"Those names are nice," she said soothingly as she hunched over the table and added them to the list of possible names that she'd started, which was rather short so far. "What about boy names? Have you found any that you like?"

"I reckon I don't entirely hate 'Joseph,'" he said after a moment, randomly flipping the pages after Hermione had handed him his book back, "but that's long for 'Joe,' isn't it? Scratch that; I refuse to be responsible for a 'Joe Weasley,' or 'Joe Granger-Weasley,'" he added quickly, before she could interject, "being in the family."

"What about 'Arthur'? After your father."

"I dunno," he said with a considering frown. "Maybe. Put it down for a possible middle name. I just don't want something too over-used, y'know? I want their names to be sort of...original, I guess."

"Original," Hermione repeated as she began flipping through her own book once more. "Original is good. Preferable, in fact." After several moments had passed, she asked almost hesitantly, "How about 'Hugo,' after *my* father?" The suggestion came out overly casual, and Ron knew that she was scared that he'd shoot her down like he had before. "It's fairly unique. I mean, It's not a very commonplace name these days, is it?"

"Maybe," he said neutrally, not wanting to hurt her feelings. "Go ahead and write that one down."

She smiled across the table, clearly pleased that he'd agreed with one of her suggestions, and Ron reckoned that he'd agree with anything she said from here on out if it meant that she smiled at him like that again.

That sentiment was short-lived, however, as he began arguing with her about the names she suggested after only minutes had passed, until she finally shut her own book with a frustrated *thump*. "I'm tiring of this," she announced as she began straightening up the pile of books, stifling a yawn. "We still have months to think up two names we can both agree on—and that'll be simplified once we find out the genders at the check-up with Madam Pomfrey next week. At any rate, it's the very least of our worries."

Ron sighed in relief as he tossed his own book aside and stretched out his long legs under the table, capturing her feet between his ankles. As he threw a mischievous glance in the direction of the room that Jean had disappeared into half an hour previously, he lowered his voice conspiratorially and said, hopefully, "So...you wanna go upstairs and finish what we started in the garage?" He playfully nudged her legs with his, adding, "I promise it won't take me long."

He watched on as her cheeks turned faintly pink and she bit her lower lip, clearly stifling a grin: She looked guilty, and Ron reckoned she felt bad about doing stuff under her parents' roof.

"Ron...", she said slowly when she looked back up, meeting his gaze, "I've been thinking about this since we got home, and I don't think that I'm...what I mean to say is that I love you, and I *do* want to be with you like that again—I think about it quite a lot, actually—but I think we might've been a bit...hasty...earlier. I thought that I was ready to...again, but I don't think that I am. Not really."

As she finished up her little spiel, she seemed to be holding her breath, and it hit him like a Bludger to the back of the head that she was expecting him to react angrily, or, at the very least, to express extreme disappointment—and, bloody hell, he *was* disappointed, that couldn't be helped—but the prevailing emotion that he felt at that moment was guilt.

She wasn't ready for that yet, and he'd practically attacked her back in the car park; in fact, he hadn't been able to keep his hands off of her since they got to her parents'—she probably hadn't even really wanted to do what they'd done in her bedroom the other night—and yet he'd pushed her like the randy prat that he was.

Feeling a bit ill, he thought of how they'd been forced together in that hospital room: She hadn't wanted to lose her virginity then, so what made him think she was ready to be with him like that now?

Fuck, he thought as the self-disgust churned in the pit of his stomach, one hand coming up to absently rub the back of his neck while he stared, unseeing, out the bay window into the Grangers' immaculate garden.

"Ron? Please don't be angry."

His eyes flashed to her in surprise, and only then did he notice the way she chewed her lip

nervously. "Angry?" *Bloody hell.* "I'm not angry, Hermione."

"Then what—?"

"Well, I'm bloody hacked at myself, if you must know."

Her brow puckered in evident confusion: "Whatever for?"

"I pushed you!" he blurted, standing up in agitation as he began pacing in front of the table. "I couldn't keep my hands off of you, could I, and then I practically bloody attacked you!"

To his amazement—and bafflement—she laughed. "Attacked me? Ron, did you hear anything that I just said to you? I love you. I want you as well. And if you'll recall, I didn't put up much resistance to your so-called 'attack.'"

He stopped pacing abruptly as he turned to stare at her, weighing the truth of her words and observing nothing but sincerity in her earnest brown eyes.

As if to emphasize her point, she stood up from her chair and moved around the table, stopping mere inches in front of him. "I love you," she repeated, reaching both hands up to cup his face, and Ron leaned into her touch instinctively, savoring the feel of her tiny hands on his scratchy cheeks. "I can't say for certain whether I believe in coincidences or if things happen for a reason, but I don't regret what happened between us, because it forced us to finally admit our feelings, and it brought us together."

She paused as she smiled up at him, her hands sliding down his chest and coming to rest on his narrow hips. "Having said that, I think I need a bit more time before we...make love again, because I need to feel like our relationship is progressing at a natural pace, that we're not simply... jumping into the physical aspect of a relationship *because* we've already done it out of necessity. Does that make any sense?"

This time, he was the one who laughed: "Not at all. I think you're barking, but I love you all the same."

"I suppose that'll do," she murmured, her smile widening before she stood on her toes, straining to plant a peck to the tip of his nose. He chuckled in response, his arms wrapping around her waist and pulling her more fully into him. "So I was thinking," she whispered into his ear, "that just because I'm not ready for...*that* yet doesn't mean I don't pride myself on my ability at finding creative ways of...of compromising..."

"'Compromising,' eh?" he repeated with a laugh. "Sweetheart, you can 'compromise' me any bloody time you want."

"Oi, you two!" Jean Granger said with a good-natured roll of her eyes as she waltzed into the kitchen, and Ron and Hermione hesitantly released each other and took a half-step back.

"Honestly, Hermione, it's amazing that you managed to make it to your sixth year without Ron here knocking you up sooner."

She waggled her eyebrows at them playfully before opening the refrigerator and rummaging inside it, and, to Ron's amazement, his ears didn't burn nearly as hotly as they might have three days ago while he chortled at Hermione's mum's comment: He reckoned he was getting used to her barmy sense of humor.

"Here, let me help you with dinner, Mum," Hermione offered, moving to her mother's side.

"Why, thank you, darling," Jean replied, beaming at her daughter. "By the way, Ron, an owl

delivered a letter for you earlier today; slipped my mind 'til just now."

As Hermione took over dinner preparations, Jean slipped back into the office, returning moments later with a thick envelope in hand, which she then handed to Ron:

His stomach immediately pummeled as he recognized the seal as being that of Fred and George's business, Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

"What the blazes do they want?" he muttered to himself as he tore open the seal and unfolded the expensive-feeling parchment, knowing that whatever it was, it couldn't be good: Those two lived to torture him.

His suspicions were confirmed the moment he skimmed the first line:

Our dearest Ronniekins,

The full extent of your...rather unexpected predicament (We're quite proud of you, by the way - no, really, we are, as we didn't think you had it in you!) has finally come to our attention, and we wish to congratulate you and the mother of our future niece(s) and/or nephew(s). Furthermore, Mother Dearest has informed us that they're having dinner with you and your future in-laws at their residence this very evening, and, as such, we've requested the pleasure of attending so that we may extend our sincerest best wishes in person. (We've promised to be on our best behavior, of course.)

In short, we'll see you soon!

Yours truly,

Gred & Forge

Ron lowered the parchment, feeling somewhat ill.

"Isn't it lovely that your brothers are joining us for dinner?"

He looked up in surprise, to find that the knives on the cutting board were chopping up the vegetables by magic, and Hermione and Jean were both bent over a flower arrangement, talking and laughing quietly.

"Molly sent over a letter this morning as well," Jean explained as she adjusted a purple flower, peering at it with a critical eye, "asking if we minded. I told her, 'The more the merrier!' Hugo and I are going to have to get to know your whole family sooner or later anyway, right?"

"Er...right," he replied weakly, wishing he could crawl into a hole somewhere and disappear until this evening was over.

Catching Hermione's eye, he could tell by the sympathetic look she gave him that this was news to her as well. *It'll be all right*, she seemed to be saying with her eyes.

Yeah. Right.

Chapter 25: Unexpected

Chapter Twenty-Five: Unexpected

oOo

This chapter is set between HBP Chapter Twenty: Lord Voldemort's Request and Chapter Twenty-One: The Unknowable Room.

oOo

"Well, dinner's in the oven," Hermione announced as she walked into the den, tucking her wand into her hair, which was gathered at the nape of her neck, and as Ron looked up from the game of chess he'd been engaged in with Mr. Granger, he momentarily forgot to breathe: She'd changed into an expensive-looking cardigan and knee-length skirt, and loose ringlets framed her face.

She looked really...*really* sodding pretty.

When Mr. Granger cleared his throat, Ron's face went immediately warm as he realized he'd been staring like a bloody idiot. Tearing his gaze from Hermione, he looked back down at the plain ol' Muggle chessboard between himself and Mr. Granger on the coffee table: Before Hermione's interruption, Ron had been in the process of explaining to her father the difference between Muggle chess and Wizard's chess, and the older man seemed fascinated enough.

"Dad, sorry to interrupt, but may I borrow your chess partner? I need to discuss something with him."

"Not at all," Hugo Granger replied, flashing a smile at his daughter as he positioned his bishop on the board. "Your young man here is giving me a run for my money, that's for certain."

"Oh?" Hermione countered with a good-natured laugh. "Looks like he's *winning* to me."

"Appearances, my dear, can be quite deceiving. Ron, you'd best go with her; she's employed her 'I mean business' voice, and I'm sure you've learned over the years not to argue with that particular tone."

Ron watched on as she smiled in response, and, despite the light-hearted exchange between father and daughter, he could practically feel the tension: Though Hermione and her dad had agreed not to row, their argument still weighed heavily in the air between them, a living, tangible thing.

"Yeah, all right," Ron finally said, clearing his throat as he climbed to his feet and briefly stretched his stiff limbs. He gave Mr. Granger what he hoped passed for an apologetic smile while making a mental note to bring his own chessboard next time he visited the Grangers'—whenever that would be—before following her from the room and up the stairs.

Despite their earlier conversation and the guilt he'd experienced, the large part of him that was wholly male couldn't help but feel hopeful that her intentions were to "compromise": While he'd managed to escape to the loo to get in a wank after the garage incident, just the thought of her grinding herself all over him made him hornier than all hell. He'd take anything he could get, but at that moment he doubted that she had anything sex-related on her mind.

His suspicions were confirmed the moment she'd aimed her wand at her bedroom door, sealing them inside together:

"We need to come up with a course of action."

He stared at her blankly, her words making zero sense to him. She might as well've spoken Gobbledygook.

"Ron, at dinner they're going to want to know what our plans are for the immediate future. Whatever we tell them, it's important that we present a united front."

"Merlin, Hermione, how're we supposed to make any plans when we don't even know if the bloody school's gonna be open next year? Or if a year, or six months from now..."

She chewed her lip as his voice trailed off, and he knew that it wasn't necessary to complete that thought aloud. Hermione was aware of what he was referring to: Voldemort. That Muggle-hating fucker was always at the back of their thoughts, wasn't he?

"I've been doing some research," Hermione finally said, slowly. "While I still maintain that ultimately it'll be impossible to escape all ramifications of the impending war, I've been thinking that it might become prudent in the near future to evacuate Mum and Dad from Britain—"

His eyes flashed to her sharply.

"—and myself, should the need arise," she amended quickly. "But I don't wish to tell them any of this—not yet. If I bring it up, they'll only become paranoid, insist even more fervently that I leave the magical world—"

"Maybe you should," Ron interjected quietly.

"And I will—*should the need arise*."

"Hermione..."

"Ron, please, I need you on my side."

"Hermione, I *am* on your side," he stated, trying and failing to keep the sudden anger out of his voice. "You're my family now, and I'm thinking about what's best for *my* family."

"Oh, you can be such a barbarian, Ronald Weasley!" she suddenly exclaimed, startling him a bit. "I suppose you'll be wanting to keep me barefoot and pregnant, then, is that it? Why don't you just...clobber me upside my head with a club and drag me by my hair to your cave?"

He gaped at her as she fumed, feeling like a crazy person had replaced the girl that he loved. He had to resist the urge to ask her the safe-question they'd decided on. "My...? What are you on about, woman? I don't wanna take your bloody shoes or...and, fucking hell, I'd never hit you... or...I just..."

She sighed loudly, her arms wrapped firmly around her middle as she plopped down on her bed. "Those are just expressions, Ron. Look, I know what you meant, and I appreciate it—I really do—but since I'm not interested in rowing with you, perhaps we should stick to...practical matters. Let's assume that the school doesn't reopen next year."

"All right," Ron said slowly, lowering himself into an armchair near her bed and angling it to face her, his forearms coming to rest on his knees. "I—I'll get a job."

"Okay. I can work as well, then."

"Hermione—"

"I refuse to debate the issue with you, Ron; I'm pregnant, not debilitated. There's absolutely no reason I can't find a part-time job up until the delivery."

"What about your mum and dad, then?"

This time, she was the one who stared at *him* blankly: "What about them?"

"Well, they want you to go to Muggle university, don't they? I reckon if Hogwarts is closed anyway, you might as well, y'know..."

She licked her lips. "Fine. I'll start submitting applications as soon as I acquire the appropriate papers. Where are we going to live?"

As he considered his response, Ron truly felt the weight of impending fatherhood for the first time. Bickering about baby names and fantasizing about living in a fancy house was one thing, but this was entirely different. In truth, he'd avoided thinking too much about the reality of their situation.

"I reckon we can save up for a flat," he finally said. "'Til then, maybe my mum and dad... I'm sure they'll offer tonight anyway...."

"There would be more room here," Hermione said slowly. "My parents already want me to come home; I'm sure they wouldn't deny you living here as well 'til we get on our feet."

"I thought you didn't wanna leave the magical world," Ron teased, unable to resist.

"That wouldn't be leaving! I mean, we wouldn't be *hiding*. Besides, this whole scenario is dependant on Hogwarts closing, isn't it? What if it doesn't?"

Ron shrugged. "We live at Hogwarts like usual, 'til you have the babies. After that...well, we've still got to have that meeting with Dumbledore and the governors, haven't we?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "That's it, then. That's what we tell them when they broach the subject—"

Quite suddenly, there was a knock at the door, followed by, "Are you two decent in there?"

"Bloody hell," Ron said as he rose to his feet. "Your mum really doesn't want us shagging, does she? You're already pregnant, so what's she worried about, anyway?"

"Maybe she thinks I'll get knocked up again and end up having triplets."

While Ron chuckled at her comment and mumbled something about "barmy Granger women," Hermione aimed her wand wordlessly at the door. "What is it, Mum?" she asked as it swung open.

"You have visitors," Jean Granger announced with a mischievous smile, and as she moved aside Ron's heart sank.

"Hermione, I must say, your mother here makes the most excellent spotted dick I've ever tasted—"

"—outside of Hogwarts, that is—"

"—but don't tell Mum we said so."

"Why, thank you so much, boys," Jean said graciously, a hand on either of their shoulders. "It's actually store-bought, but I trust my secret's safe with you two?"

"I never would've guessed," George replied smoothly as he turned to face Hermione's mum, taking her hand in both of his as he graced her with his most charming smile, "but you can trust us implicitly."

"That's right, we won't tell a soul," Fred agreed with a wink.

"Ron," Jean said suddenly, rounding on him and appearing appropriately smitten as she gently plied her hand from George's, "you didn't tell me that your brothers are entrepreneurs!"

"Entrepie-whats?"

"They were just telling me about their marvelous products," she plowed on, "and I must say, some of their inventions sound quite genius!"

"Yeah. They're brilliant," Ron said flatly.

"Well, I'll just leave you kids alone, then. Dinner will be ready in about an hour." With a smile and a wink, she turned on her heel and exited as swiftly as she'd come. As she disappeared from sight, it was hard not to notice that Fred and George both had their eyes trained appreciatively on her arse.

Hermione cleared her throat loudly, and the twins finally turned to face them once more: "I must say, Hermione," Fred stated, unfazed, "your mother is quite an exceptional lady, isn't she?"

"Yes, quite charming," George agreed.

"I'll be sure and pass along the compliment," Hermione returned dryly, clearly amused.

"Please do," they replied in unison.

"Are Mum and Dad here, then?" Ron asked suddenly, without preamble.

"What, no greeting for your favorite brothers?"

"Yeah, aren't you pleased to see us, Ronniekins?"

"After all, we only wish to convey our sincerest congratulations—"

"—as we clearly expressed in our letter."

As they spoke, their eyes roved curiously about Hermione's bedroom, and Ron felt distinctly uncomfortable with having them here. He wasn't sure why, really, except that he was fairly certain that, until now, he was the only male to ever enter her private sanctuary—er, no pun intended—who wasn't blood-related.

"Bollocks," Ron said almost wearily as Fred wandered over to Hermione's dresser and picked up a small figurine, examining it. "You might as well cut the crap, 'cause I know you're just here to torture me. Can't believe Mum even let you come to begin with. For fuck's sake, will you put that down?"

"Language, Ron," Fred chided as he placed the figurine back on the dresser and turned to face the others once more, his arms crossed casually over his chest. "Is that any way to speak in front of the mother of your unborn children?"

"Oh, come off it—"

"And to think that he insults us so, Georgie."

"I know, Fred, I'm wounded that he seems to think so little of us. As if we'd come all this way just to torment him."

"Then why *did* you come? And don't tell me it's to congratulate us, 'cause we all know that's a load of waffle."

"The hostility," George said with a *tsk*, moving to stand by Fred. "And to think that we fretted over his hospital bed on his birthday."

"Yes, it does appear that our woes were wasted on someone who questions our sincerity, doesn't it? In fact, I think I'm starting to have second thoughts about that job offer. Especially after what we went through to convince Mum and Dad that we're serious..."

"Job offer? What job offer?"

"Indeed, Fred," George replied, ignoring Ron's question. "I don't think someone so ungracious should be offered a managerial position in our business, do you?"

"Absolutely not, George. We definitely should reserve the offer for someone with a positive, can-do attitude."

"If you two don't tell me what you're on about—"

"We were under the impression that you might, in the near future, require employment, Ronniekins. To help support your family."

Ron exchanged a glance with Hermione. "Yeah, but—"

"We're planning to eventually open up a branch of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes in Hogsmeade, and we're looking to train up a manager. Are you interested or aren't you?"

"It's important that he completes his education," Hermione said suddenly, reaching over and taking his hand.

"You mean assuming that Hogwarts isn't shut down by the governors or that You-Know-Who doesn't come to power before September?"

"Yes. Assuming that. Obviously."

"He can apprentice with us this summer," Fred clarified.

"The pay won't be much," George added, "but we reckon it's a start."

"And after he graduates next summer, if he's still interested—"

"—assuming that career as Brain Healer he's been dreaming about doesn't work out for him—"

"—he can come back and work for us," they finished together.

Ron looked between the twins and Hermione. "You—you're serious?" he said after a moment, fully expecting them to suddenly declare that they were taking the piss. It certainly wouldn't surprise him. "You're really offering me a job."

"Serious as a heart attack, little brother."

"Would we lie to you?"

"It's a very generous offer," Hermione said diplomatically, still clutching Ron's hand, "and one that Ron will consider very carefully. Won't you?"

"Er...yeah," he said slowly, still unsure of what to make of this, and whether he trusted them. "I reckon...if I've got nothing better going on this summer... Yeah, sure, why not? No promises about after graduation, though."

"Still counting on that Brain Healer career, eh?" Fred said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Best of luck with that."

"I got all the O.W.L.s I need to be an Auror, didn't I?" he stated defiantly, his ears going hot. "I reckon I'm not as daft as you think I am."

"Yeah? Just wait 'til you sit your N.E.W.T.s."

"*You* never did," Ron pointed out.

"That's 'cause they're not required to start your own business, are they?"

Ron had just opened his mouth to fire back when George cut in with, "Seriously, though, Ron, I have it on good authority there's a pretty extensive waiting list to get into the Auror Program. You can work for us in the meantime—if you decide you want to."

George wasn't laughing.

"Yeah. All right. Maybe."

"That's the spirit!" He clapped Ron on the shoulder much as Fred had before pulling Hermione in for a quick hug. "Welcome to the family, little sister," he said as he released her, turning back to Ron: "Treat this one right, yeah? Don't know what she sees in you, personally," he added teasingly, "but you've got a good witch here."

"Yeah, you don't gotta tell *me* that."

As the twins retreated, Fred called, "See you two lovebirds downstairs!"

oOo

Much to Hermione's immense relief, dinner went as smoothly as could be expected, and the presence of the twins actually proved to be a *good* thing: Mum found Fred and George charming while Dad found them the height of hilarity, and when the beginnings of a disagreement sprang up, the twins could always be counted on to say just the right thing to turn it into a joke, thereby effectively diffusing the tension. Only Mrs. Weasley seemed flustered and embarrassed by their antics and repeatedly threatened to send them home if they didn't "behave themselves."

When the conversation inevitably turned to Ron and Hermione and their immediate plans, she did all the talking while he held her hand supportively beneath the table. It took a bit of negotiating, but, in the end, everyone agreed that the course of action that she and Ron had decided on in her bedroom before dinner was quite practical. Only when Mrs. Weasley brought up the prospect of marriage did things become overly tense, at which point Mr. Weasley presented a bottle of Ogden's finest and proposed a toast to the future parents.

It was half past nine when Hermione began clearing away the dinner table. Dad, Ron, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and the twins were in the den, the men quite drunk, if truth be told, judging by how

boisterous they'd become as the evening had progressed; even Mum and Mrs. Weasley had partaken in their share of wine.

Although Hermione had never had much taste for alcohol, aside from the occasional butterbeer, obviously, and had always frowned upon the parties thrown in the Gryffindor common room, she had to admit to herself that she was feeling a bit...left out, she supposed: She'd taken for granted the freedom of simply having the *choice* to imbibe, should she so desire.

"I'll take care of the kitchen, sweetheart," Mum said as she sauntered up behind Hermione, kissing her daughter's cheek while placing her wineglass on the countertop. "Go enjoy yourself. It's your party, after all."

She smiled at her mother gratefully, squeezing her hand briefly before slipping into the sitting room: It was quite disconcerting, somehow, but undeniably good, seeing Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Fred and George in her home. How many times had she, Hermione, been in theirs, yet they'd never before sat foot in her own home?

It felt right. They were part of her family, after all, and had been for some years, and she wanted them to feel comfortable here.

Mrs. Weasley was laughing on the sofa in response to something her husband had said, wineglass in one hand and her other on his knee, and Hermione smiled to see Ron's mother having such a good time: When she and Ron had informed her earlier that they had no intentions of getting married in the near future, a bit of delicate damage control had been required.

Thankfully, Mr. Weasley seemed to always know what to do to put his wife in a good mood once more.

Hermione smiled at that thought while absently watching Fred and George going through Dad's VHS collection, and she couldn't help but feel hopeful that she and Ron would still be that happy twenty years from now. She certainly hoped so.

At least they both had had good examples growing up concerning what marriage and commitment were all about—or, what they *should* be about, at any rate.

Her eyes turned to Ron then, who was engaged in a very jubilant conversation with Dad, gesturing wildly as he spoke, and Hermione caught the words "Quaffle" and "Snitch" over the lively music on the stereo.

He was explaining Quidditch to her father. Of course.

She smiled gently, overcome with a surge of affection.

When she approached the two men, she leaned down on sudden impulse and hugged her father. He seemed surprised for a split second before returning the embrace, his strong arms slipping around her shoulders. "I love you, baby girl," he said into her ear, and she could ignore the alcohol on his breath. "And I'm so proud of you. Not many young ladies could've handled your situation with half your grace and ability to adapt. You've always had your head on straight, and you're going to be an amazing mother."

"Thanks, Daddy," she whispered, swiping at sudden tears as she straightened back up.

"And this fine young man here," he continued, quite a bit louder and gesturing at Ron in an exaggerated manner, "was just explaining to me the rules of the fine sport of Quidditch. I should very much like to view a match some day."

"I'll see what I can do to make that happen," Ron retorted with a wide, toothy grin, and Hermione observed that his eyes were quite bloodshot and he was slurring his words a bit: She'd seen him like this before, of course, in the common room after the occasional Quidditch match, but since she'd generally avoided those parties she wasn't quite certain how to handle an inebriated Ron.

Just as that thought had crossed her mind, Ron abruptly reached out and grabbed her by her hips, pulling her unceremoniously onto his lap. Before she could squirm her way off of him, feeling mortified that her father was sitting *right there*, his arms slipped snugly around her waist, entrapping her while he nuzzled her throat.

"Ron," she protested, her face warming as she glanced at her father, who was staring down at his mostly empty tumbler like it was the most interesting thing in the room.

"What? I just...I'm not *doing* anything, 'Ermione. Just wanna be close to you."

"Yes, but—"

"I'd like to propose a toast," Mr. Weasley said loudly and abruptly while lumbering to his feet, "to two soon-to-be grandfathers, myself and Hugo here, sure to be the finest two grandfathers, Muggle or magical, in the country!"

"Here, here!" concurred Dad, raising his glass, and the twins both whooped in response, imitating the gesture; however, they all seemed to notice at once that their glasses were mostly empty.

"I'll remedy that!" Mr. Weasley assured them all, picking up the Ogden's and nearly tripping several times as he went about the room, refilling everyone's glass.

"Now, Arthur, I think you and the boys have had enough," Mrs. Weasley protested when she realized what was going on: She'd been engaged in a conversation with Mum, who'd rejoined them only recently.

"Codswallop," Mr. Weasley replied merrily. "Everyone in this room is of age, Molly, and this is a celebration! Granted, the situation isn't ideal, but we may as well make the best of it, yes?"

The twins and Ron agreed cheerfully before tossing their drinks back, and Hermione couldn't help but smile at their infectious enthusiasm, whether the lot of them were intoxicated or not.

"I'd like to make a toast as well," Fred said suddenly, once Mr. Weasley had refilled their glasses yet again, "to my little brother's virility. Congratulations, Ronniekins, on being blessed with the Weasley family propensity for—"

"That's enough!" Mrs. Weasley protested once more, red-faced and fuming. "Honestly, Frederic Weasley, that's quite enough with you. It's time to go home now, Arthur. Jean, dear, thank you very much for having us over," she added, her tone decidedly sweeter, reaching over and taking Mum's hands in both of hers. "It was quite lovely, and you have such a beautiful home and a beautiful family."

"Thank you so much, Molly," Mum returned graciously. "It certainly wasn't any trouble, and you and your family are welcome in my home any time—especially since we're practically family now anyway."

"We'll talk soon. I'll owl you."

Goodbyes and hugs were exchanged all around, and as Mrs. Weasley pulled Hermione into her arms, she was sure to remind her to eat properly and to get plenty of rest. "And you," she added, embracing her youngest son tightly, "do as Mr. and Mrs. Granger say, take care of Hermione,

and *behave yourself*."

She eyed Ron pointedly as she released him, and Hermione watched on as his face turned as red as his hair at the implication in her tone.

"Yeah—er, yes, Mum."

And then they left, Mrs. Weasley supporting a slightly stumbling Mr. Weasley while yelling at Fred and George, who'd broken out into a rather loud drinking song.

"Well, that was...pleasant, considering," Dad stated once he'd shut the door behind them, while Hermione aimed her wand at half-emptied glasses, ushering them into the kitchen. "I must say, Ron, your brothers are quite amusing. Well," he added abruptly, eyeing Mum meaningfully, "I'm positively knackered. Think I'll be going to bed, then. G'night, kids."

"Night, Mr. Granger."

"Goodnight, Dad."

Mum pulled Hermione into a quick hug. "Sleep tight, darling." She then flashed her daughter a customary smile and a wink before following her husband up the stairs.

"I think it's time to get you to bed as well," Hermione declared when they were alone, turning to Ron, who'd begun to slump into the cushions of the loveseat, looking as if he was barely hanging onto consciousness. "C'mon, then," she urged, kneeling next to him and wrapping one arm around his waist, helping him hobble to his feet.

"Are you taking me to bed, 'Ermione?" he asked as they climbed up the stairs, slurring his words slightly, and there was no mistaking his suggestive tone.

"I'm taking you to *your* bed," she clarified as they reached the second-floor landing, "and after I make sure you re-hydrate I'm going to *mine*."

"Wait, stop," he said abruptly, but the command was rather unnecessary, as the moment he'd stopped she'd done so as well.

"What's wrong? Are you going to be sick?"

"No, no, it's not that, I just..." He turned to face her more fully, and then, rather abruptly, Hermione found herself pressed against the wall as he framed her face with both his large hands. Her breathing hitched at the unexpected nearness, and although his eyes were bloodshot and a bit unfocused, he gazed down at her with the most open, intense expression that she'd ever seen on another person—and there was nothing sexual about this particular look.

She shivered.

"Ron, you're drunk," she stated, yet she didn't attempt to push him away.

"Yeah, a little," he admitted with a snort of laughter, "which helps, since I'm about to say somethin' I don't know if I could say sober..."

"Which is...?"

"I love you."

"Ron, you've said that to me while sober. More than once."

"And...and I was thinking during dinner...I *do* wanna get married, Hermione. I wanna marry you."

Chapter 26: Important Things

Chapter Twenty-Six: Important Things

oOo

This chapter is set between HBP Chapter Twenty: Lord Voldemort's Request and Chapter Twenty-One: The Unknowable Room.

oOo

She blinked up at him, feeling certain that the synapses in her brain must have mistranslated the words that had left Ron's mouth, yet as the seconds ticked by and he did nothing more than continue to gaze down at her, awaiting her response, she knew that she hadn't misunderstood after all. And the sincerity in his eyes was quite blatant.

As this revelation sank in, Hermione allowed herself the indulgence of recalling her old fantasy of being escorted in a white gown down an aisle by her father while Ron awaited her at the altar. It was nothing more than a silly, girlish daydream, one that she'd had since she'd been in third year and had begun to realize that she viewed Ron in a decidedly...different manner than she viewed Harry.

That was when she'd first noticed that the brush of Ron's arm against hers while sitting with him in the common room caused a shiver to run down her spine. When he'd lean in close to her on the couch in front of the fireplace, attempting to get a look at her homework, a strange warmth would bloom between her legs in response to his closeness—despite knowing that he was more interested in her answers than he was in her. Even the angry set of his jaw when they'd rowed had made her want to simultaneously snog him and slap him.

It had all been so confusing, really, especially when that fantasy of marrying Ron had invaded her thoughts the first time they'd gone into Hogsmeade together. Without Harry. It was the first time that she could recall spending more than an hour or so with it being just the two of them, as Harry had always seemed to be the glue that bound them together; in the early years, she'd wondered more than once whether they would even speak to one another if it wasn't for their mutual friendship with Harry.

When it was just the two of them, though, he could, at times, be thoughtful and even sweet. And of course she'd always found him funny—when the joke wasn't at her expense, obviously—and good-looking and even chivalrous, in his own way.

Hermione had never expected him to reciprocate any romantic feelings, as he'd made it clear, or so it had seemed from her perspective, that she was just a mate, much like Harry, only less fun. She had therefore always assumed that Ron would grow up and one day marry someone pretty and charming and outgoing, someone...not Hermione.

Now, hearing him voice the very desire that she'd secretly harbored since she was fourteen, and seeing the earnestness in his eyes, even if he did happen to be pissed—if anything, people tended to become shockingly honest while intoxicated, as their normal brain-to-mouth filters were compromised—she couldn't help but experience a surge of longing and excitement.

And yet...would he still want this, right now, if she wasn't pregnant?

The answer to that question was something that she needed like she needed oxygen, yet it wasn't a

conversation that she was prepared to have with him, not right now, in his inebriated state.

Taking a steadying breath and looking him straight in the eye, she said, "We'll discuss this when you're sober."

"So...is that a yes or a no?"

"Was that a proposal?" she countered. After all, he hadn't actually said the words "Will you marry me?," had he?

"Er...yeah, I reckon it was."

"Then that's a 'you're drunk and I'm not discussing it with you until you've sobered up,'" she responded as she slipped around him and took his arm, steering him toward the guestroom.

"Ermione, I'm serious," he insisted, sounding a bit like a child—an overly tall, large-limbed child—as she pulled him through the door while aiming her wand at the lamp, and the room was suddenly bathed in a soft glow. "Let's get married. Maybe...maybe we'll get to share a room next year, and just think—we could shag any time we bloody want, and no one could say anything, 'cause that's what married couples are s'posed to do, innit? It's expected."

"You want to get married so we can have guilt-free sex?" she was unable to resist asking as she rummaged through the chest-of-drawers and pulled out a pair of his pajamas, yet despite her words she was biting her lip in an attempt at stifling a grin.

Thinking with his hormones or not, he really was quite adorable in his drunken state.

"What? No—I mean, well, that'd just be a perk, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, but it's highly doubtful that we'd be approved to share a room," she said reasonably, turning to face him. "Married and expectant parents or not, we're still students."

"Yeah, but it's the school's fault we're in this situation to begin with, innit? I reckon they owe us."

"Ron, take off your clothes."

"Well, Hermione, that's rather sudden, doncha think?" he replied without missing a beat, that familiar impish lopsided grin spreading across his features. "Specially after what you said earlier about waiting and whatnot."

"Relax, Romeo," she murmured, adopting her mother's nickname for him as she rolled her eyes.

"We're just getting you changed. Here," she added, moving closer and placing the pajamas on the bed before him.

"If you say so," he muttered with a shrug, and, without waiting for her to step away or to turn around, he rather brusquely tore his polo over his head and undid his trousers, allowing them to drop to the floor.

She inhaled sharply and resisted the urge to cover her eyes out of instinctive modesty when she saw that he wasn't wearing any pants. After all, that would be just silly considering the current nature of their relationship. (She might as well accustom herself to seeing him naked.) Even still, she couldn't stop the warmth of embarrassment that spread through her cheeks, and somewhere decidedly further south, as she bit her lip.

"Oops. Forgot I wasn't wearing any pants," Ron said in a tone that clearly belied his statement. It was quite obvious that he hadn't forgotten at all.

Tearing her gaze from his currently flaccid penis, Hermione looked up into his eyes to find him watching her intently, clearly waiting to see what she'd do next.

Oh, honestly, what does he expect? she thought with a roll of her eyes. *That I'll jump his bones simply because he's exposed himself to me? Of all the ridiculous...*

Taking a step back in an attempt to put some distance between them, the backs of her knees unexpectedly hit the bed, and she fell to her bum on the mattress. "Here," she said, feeling flustered and embarrassed, yanking up the clothes from next to her and thrusting them in his face while avoiding looking directly at him.

"What, you're not gonna dress me?" he asked with a smirk, a playful edge to his voice as he took his pajamas from her and began pulling them on with a sigh. "I'll take that as a 'no,'" he mumbled when she merely stood back up and walked to the bureau. Picking up an empty vase, she quickly Transfigured it into a glass and filled it to the brim with water from her wand tip.

By the time she'd turned to face him again, Hermione had managed to compose herself somewhat, and she discovered that Ron was now fully clothed once more and had plopped down on top of the comforter. Returning to his bedside and sitting next to him on the duvet, she pressed the glass into his hands. "Here, it's important that you re-hydrate yourself, assuming, of course, that you don't wish to end up with a horrid hangover."

As he drank deeply without protest, she reached out and stroked the sweaty fringe from his forehead. "Y'know," he said when he'd downed the water, wiping his mouth on the back of his arm and handing the glass back to her, "all I need for that is a good hangover potion. Works faster than a charm."

"Do you think it likely that my parents have any hangover potions on hand?" she countered as she refilled his glass and pressed it into his hands yet again. "One more."

After he'd downed his second glass and slumped against the pillows, evidently exhausted, she took the glass from him and flipped off the lamp. Leaning over him, she then briefly pressed her lips to his in a gentle kiss. "Get some sleep, Ron."

"Hermione?" He caught her hand as she moved to leave. "Don't go." In the dim moonlight seeping in through the sheer curtains, she thought she saw his face flush. "I just... Thank you. For taking care o'me, I mean. And I meant it... I wanna marry you, babies or not. There's a war coming, isn't there? I reckon that makes people think about the important things, y'know?" Again, his tone radiated childlike earnestness, and she was overcome by a keen surge of affection for him as she squeezed his hand, his words washing over her, enveloping her like a soothing blanket.

I reckon that makes people think about the important things, y'know?

She closed her eyes briefly. *The important things.* Hermione had once had a very different idea about "the important things." As a child, she'd believed that having an education and securing a career were vital beyond all else, but, in light of all else that was happening in the world and in the grand scheme of things, those values now seemed trite, petty.

What did she consider to be important now? She knew, beyond a doubt, that the answer was love. Or, more specifically, the love she had for her family: Mum and Dad, Ron, Harry, the other Weasleys, the two lives growing inside her. All else was inconsequential, secondary at best.

She knew that marriage was a value of Ron's, and one he didn't take lightly at that. Likewise, Hermione also placed value in the institution, although she'd never imagined that she'd ever be seriously considering it at such a young age.

She supposed that circumstances had a way of sorting out one's priorities.

"I do know," she whispered as she stroked his hair. "We'll talk about it tomorrow, okay?" She was very aware that there was a strong possibility that he wouldn't even remember any of this in the morning, as alcohol affects the portion of the brain responsible for short-term memory.

He smiled up at her lazily, and she found herself thinking about something else he'd just said to her: *Thank you. For taking care o'me, I mean.*

It occurred to her then that she hadn't exactly *taken care of him* the way he'd taken care of her. Not really. Earlier that day in the car...he hadn't been satisfied, had he? She'd noticed him disappear into the loo after helping Mum put away the groceries, and Hermione had had a feeling that he'd been...well, taking care of himself. She'd felt guilty, yet if she'd followed him she had no doubt in her mind that Mum would've noticed. And although her mother appeared nonchalant on the surface, Hermione was more than aware that Jean Granger was simply handling her daughter's sexuality in the best way that she knew how. More than likely, she was using her sense of humor to mask her discomfort, and Hermione didn't wish to be disrespectful or...insensitive to that fact.

However, as Ron blinked up at her with sleepy but curious eyes, looking positively adorable while unmistakably waiting to see what she would do or say next, she experienced a rush of keen desire and an inexplicable need to please him.

Without truly thinking about she was doing, she climbed astride him, straddling his hips as she leaned down and kissed him sweetly yet passionately, and his reaction was immediate: His arms wrapped tightly around her middle while he arched up off the bed and deepened the kiss, his tongue delving into her mouth and dueling greedily with hers.

He groaned against her lips, sucking her tongue, as his large hands slipped down to run over her outer thighs, bunching her skirt up higher on her hips while he squeezed and thrust upward, grounding his arousal into her. "Fuck," he grunted, his mouth tearing from hers before nipping her throat; he appeared almost crazed with unfulfilled yearning. "You drive me fucking wild, 'Ermione. So beautiful. I wanna...*fuck*..."

I wanna fuck.

His voice was gravelly and thick, and she wasn't sure if it's what he intended to say, but she bit her lip as his words shot a spike of piercing lust straight to her womb, causing her stomach to somersault. Leaning back swiftly, overcome by the sheer force of her desire, she yanked open her cardigan and sent the buttons flying. Ron's hand flew up, attempting in his over eagerness to reach behind her and unhook her bra, but she swatted his hand away impatiently, unhooking it herself before shrugging the cumbersome clothing from her shoulders.

His large palms were on her exposed breasts immediately, squeezing them, rolling her nipples while grunting her name and the occasional curse word as they continued to rock together.

She was aware on a certain level that his vulgar language, especially in such an intimate setting, really should bother her, but she found that it didn't. Quite the contrary, she was turned on by his dirty mouth, and she was panting, overwhelmed by him and his raw urgency as she suddenly slid down the bed and positioned herself between his thighs.

"Please...fuck, yeah...baby...", he breathed shakily, almost desperately as she drew his straining erection from his pajama bottoms, and as she did so she couldn't help but admire him for a moment in the dim lighting. She'd always thought drawings and pictures in anatomy books of male genitalia to be strange-looking, to say the least, but she found Ron's fully erect penis to be... quite handsome, actually. As far as penises went.

Glancing up, she saw him lick his full lips while he watched her eagerly, his eyes unmistakably clouded by unadulterated lust as his hands fisted in the sheets at his side. Taking a nervous breath, counting on instinct to guide her, Hermione leaned down and took him into her mouth.

He hissed sharply, one of his hands gently entangling in her hair as she began to move, bobbing her head up and down at an experimental pace and doing her best not to scrape him with her teeth. It soon, however, became apparent that she would need to use her hands to accommodate for his size.

"Ermione...sofuckingood...", he whimpered, and the sharp upward thrusts of his hips, which he was obviously attempting to restrain with a considerable effort, told her she must be doing it right. Encouraged, she reached down with one hand, gently squeezing and massaging his testicles as she dragged her tongue up his substantial length, discovering what made him hiss or pant or groan with pleasure.

Struck by sudden inspiration, and feeling entirely more confident than she had before—honestly, she wasn't sure what had come over her—she leaned up, causing his penis to slip between her breasts. Glancing at him, she watched on as his eyes widened perceptibly and his mouth opened, and she couldn't help but feel pleased with herself.

"Fucking hell!" he practically bellowed, moving his hips as she pressed her breasts together on instinct, his length sliding between her breasts for several frantic, desperate strokes. Moments later, when she scooted back down and sucked his tip between her lips while wrapping her hands firmly around his shaft, he grunted and shuddered as he began to pulsate in her mouth: "*Fuck*, sweetheart, gonna cum..."

As his orgasm wracked his body and he pumped his semen—which tasted a bit like blood, if truth be told—into her mouth, she swallowed on impulse, taking all he had to give, until his pulsing at long last ceased.

By the time she climbed up next to him on the bed, Hermione was experiencing a strange combination of embarrassment and pride at the utterly gobsmacked, satisfied expression on his face.

And she had to admit that she quite enjoyed the idea that *she'd* made him look like that. She felt a bit giddy, actually, and when he pulled her into his arms and kissed her—seeming to not care where her mouth had just been—she laughed almost shyly against his lips.

"What?" Ron asked, clear amusement in his voice as he turned onto his side, facing her, his arm settling across her waist and pulling her in closer.

"Nothing."

"No, really, what is it?"

"I just...I can't believe I just did that," she finally admitted.

"Well, I can." He smirked and nudged her playfully. "And it was bloody sodding wicked, I might add. 'Specially that thing with your tits. You sure you've never done that before?"

"Oh, honestly." She laughed as she blushed fiercely, smacking his shoulder. "Are you still drunk?"

"Nah. That was pretty sobering. *Really* gotta pee now, though."

"Oh, charming, Ron. That's just what a girl likes to hear after doing...that."

"Hey, it's your fault for forcing all that water down my throat," he retorted with a snort of laughter, reaching up to tuck her hair behind her ear.

She found herself thinking that she liked the way his eyes crinkled around the edges when he laughed, his eyes sparkling with humor and mischief. "And if *you* hadn't felt the need to consume enough firewhisky to inebriate a small country, I wouldn't have had to force all that water down your throat, now, would I?"

"Yeah, I reckon not," he conceded with a chuckle.

Silence settled between them for a moment as they gazed at each other, both lost in their own thoughts. "Hey, Hermione?" he said after a moment, hesitation in his voice.

"Yes, Ron?"

"Stay with me."

She smiled; the seemingly simple request plainly had more than one meaning.

Craning her neck toward him, she planted a kiss to the tip of his nose. "Where else would I go?"

Chapter 27: All Good Things

Chapter Twenty-Seven: All Good Things

oOo

This chapter is set between HBP Chapter Twenty: Lord Voldemort's Request and Chapter Twenty-One: The Unknowable Room.

oOo

He groaned, blinking against harsh sunlight as distinctly unpleasant awareness stole over his mind and body, the latter of which felt stiff and achy, the former, fuzzy; funny how an evening of drinking could make him feel like he'd fallen from his broom, or spent the evening wrestling a bunch of beefy professional Beaters. (Er...wait, that last thing sounded a bit funny, didn't it? Ah, well. Sod it.) To make matters worse, his mouth felt like he'd spent all night eating sand, his head felt like someone had shoved razorblades behind his eyes, and...bloody hell, he was gonna hurl...

Ron stumbled from bed, still only half-awake, and barely made it to the toilet across the hall. As last night's dinner upended from his stomach, resultant of his ill-considered firewhisky binge, he deeply regretted not considering the fact that he didn't have a hangover potion on hand before deciding to get pissed.

It'd seemed like a good idea at the time, though, hadn't it? After all, everyone else had been drinking, having a good time, and Ron seemed to recall bonding with Hermione's dad, at least.

Once he'd emptied his bladder, brushed his teeth, and downed several glasses of water along with something called "aspirin" that he dug out of the medicine cabinet—the label on the little bottle said that it was for pain—he padded back across the hall to the guestroom. As he did so, he heard the sound of the television drifting up from downstairs, or maybe from her parents' bedroom, and when he caught the unmistakable scent of bacon wafting up from the kitchen, it strangely served to both make his mouth salivate and his already unstable stomach churn.

Pulling the bedroom door shut behind him while averting his sensitive eyes from the sunlight gleaming on the hardwood floor, his gaze landed on the slumbering girl in his bed.

He momentarily forgot to breathe. He forgot about his bloody *hangover*, for fuck's sake: Her dark hair was wilder than ever and splayed out over his pillow, her plump lips that he knew to feel like velvet were slightly parted, and one of her hands was up by her head, her dainty little wrist turned outward, while her other rested on her chest. Best of all, she was wearing his favorite old Chudley Cannons t-shirt—the one with several holes and was too small but which he refused to toss despite her gentle nagging—which had ridden up her ribcage, revealing a lot of smooth, flat stomach.

For a second, his eyes lingered on her belly, searching for any signs of the two lives she carried, the lives that he, Ron, had planted inside her, but it was still too soon for that, he reckoned. At any rate, in the next moments his eyes were drawn to her sexy little navel and further down, to her pink cotton knickers, which were trimmed in lace and riding low on her hips; her legs were sprawled out on top of the tangled covers, her left knee bent, and his eyes landed instinctively on the strip of pink cotton nestled directly between her legs.

She was a—a fucking angel, was what she was. A sexy, mind-blowingly beautiful, brilliant angel—Blimey, he really was a tit, wasn't he? Pussy-whipped, as Fred and George had said, but sod it if he gave a fuck—and he experienced a surge of thrill at the idea that she was really all his, and

he was hers.

Quite abruptly, Ron recalled a flash from the night before, like a snapshot, of Hermione's pretty head bobbing between his legs; he remembered the sweet, wet suction of her mouth on his cock; and, rather vividly, he saw his dick between her fucking *tits*—Bloody hell, had that actually happened?—and then—

Wait...he seemed to remember blubbering on in the hall outside the bedroom about wanting to marry her...

He cringed, trying to piece together what had happened during the gaps in his memory, finally concluding that while she hadn't exactly said yes, she'd given him a blowjob/titty-fuck combo, hadn't she? If that wasn't a positive sign, then Ron had no sodding clue what the fuck was.

A sense of sudden euphoria settling over him, feeling like he could take on the world—he vaguely recalled that the feeling was similar to when Harry had pretended to give him the liquid luck—Ron found himself crawling up the bed, parting Hermione's thighs as he went, eager to reciprocate for that unexpectedly naughty little performance she'd given him last night.

She stirred only slightly in her sleep as he draped her legs over his shoulders, and a small sigh that might have been his name escaped her lips. Grinning, Ron slid his hands along her upper legs just beneath her bloody brilliant little arse, his thumbs rubbing gentle circles on her flesh as he leaned his head down, pressing his long nose into her folds through her knickers and breathing in her intoxicating scent.

On a certain level, he knew he was being a randy perv—but no more than she was, right? Fucking hell, she'd given him a *blowjob/titty-fuck combo*, for fuck's sake. What in the name of Merlin's saggy left bollock could be any kinkier than *that*?

Feeling possibly more turned on than he ever had in his whole bloody life but trying to ignore his aching, throbbing knob, he leaned up and hooked his fingers beneath the elastic of her knickers and slowly tugged them down her legs, his heart hammering the whole time.

She stirred again, her hand on her chest shifting to uncover her breasts and revealing to him her tightly pebbled nipples, clearly visible through the clingy fabric of the t-shirt. Breathing hard through his mouth, Ron waited to see if she would awaken, but when she did nothing more than sigh again, he settled between her thighs once more; his eyes absorbed that secret place between her legs that he'd attempted to imagine a thousand bloody times since hitting puberty, taking in her folds, her downy curls, the pink nub nestled just above her juicy little slit.

Fuck, she was perfect. Loads better than those magically touched-up images in *Wicked Witches*.

One hand carefully hiking her right knee up higher and his other cupping her plump little bum, he leaned down and delved his tongue between her folds, slowly licking up the length of her slit, savoring her flavor, before sucking her clit between his lips.

Rather abruptly, Hermione stiffened beneath him and gasped, her fist shooting up to entangle unexpectedly in his hair: "*Oh! Oh, Ron!*" she breathed shakily, and he couldn't help but grin against her flesh, feeling a bit giddy that she hadn't shoved him off of her and accused him of being a perv—and was instead encouraging him with her throaty moans and her hips that gyrated unapologetically against his face.

When he glanced up and saw her playing with her own tits beneath the t-shirt, he practically lost touch with reality: Plummetering his tongue into her fuck-tight, wet little quim, driving it into her repeatedly in the primal way that he longed to drive his cock into her, he used his fingers that

weren't gripping her bum to furiously rub her swollen clit; when he changed tactics, replacing his tongue with three fingers, fucking her frantically in that manner while tonguing her clit, he felt her inner muscles begin to pulse around his fingers with the beginnings of her climax...

As Hermione whimpered his name and her thighs clamped tightly around his head, her entire body trembling from head to toe, Ron felt like he was suffocating, and his jaw ached from the effort. Yet he'd happily die at that moment—death by pussy, he thought madly, Fred and George would be so proud—and, when he inserted just the tip of his finger into her arse on impulse, he barely even registered the pain as she literally ripped some of the hair from his scalp.

After several lingering, drawn-out moments, she finally went limp beneath him, her trembling thighs loosening their death grip on his neck. She was breathing heavily, her body still tremulous in the aftermath of her release as he slid up her body and shoved her shirt up over her brilliant tits, swooping down and sucking one of her peaks between his lips while pinching the other.

Hermione gasped as he alternated between her breasts, her hips thrusting against him, and he felt her wet, scorching heat *right there*. (Strangely enough, he couldn't even remember removing his pajama bottoms.) One thrust, and he could bury his dick inside her like every purely male instinct that he possessed demanded that he do. One thrust, and he could pound her into the mattress until he spilled himself inside her. It'd be so easy, too...

Bracing his arms on either side of her head, he leaned up and peered down at her, getting a good look at her face for the first time that morning: Her chocolate-colored eyes were wide, her breathing labored, as she clearly waited to see what he'd do next.

She wasn't telling him to stop, but she wasn't exactly encouraging him, either.

Just as his body was winning the war with his head, he thought of the conversation that they'd had just yesterday in the kitchen. Well, the gist of it, anyway, since he couldn't, at that exact moment, recall her reasons because the majority of his blood was concentrated in the lower portion of his anatomy, but he *did* seem to remember something about her saying she wanted to wait.

"Hermione?" he breathed, needing her to say *something*.

Fucking hell, he didn't wanna stop, but he would if she wanted him to. All she had to do was say the bleedin' word...

Suddenly she blinked, seeming to rouse herself. "I-I want to, Ron," she whispered shakily. "But I don't... I don't know if..."

Fuck it. If she wasn't sure, he wasn't gonna bloody do it, 'specially since the first time they'd done it she'd been outta her mind; the very last thing he wanted for their *second* time was for her to feel pressured.

With a sheer force of will that he honestly hadn't known that he even possessed, Ron wrenched himself off of her and collapsed next her before pulling her fiercely into his arms. "'S'okay," he murmured, kissing the top of her head. "I'm sorry. I know you wanna wait. Didn't mean to...to pressure you or whatever."

"Ron," she whispered against his chest, her voice muffled, "how much do you remember from last night?"

He paused in the process of stroking her hair, not sure what she was referring to, exactly. "Enough," he finally said with a nervous chuckle. "I remember that bloody wicked knob job—"

Hermione groaned, but whether from embarrassment or at his crudeness, he wasn't entirely sure.

"—and that I asked you to marry me." The nervous hitch in his voice was evident to his own ears. "Well, I reckon I botched it up, but I-I, er"—he cleared his throat—"I meant it. I mean—bloody hell—I'm not saying we should do it *tomorrow* or anything, but let's, y'know, make—make a promise to... Fuck, I'm rubbish at this." He rubbed the back of his neck absently, thinking that she'd be better off marrying Krum.

What the hell was wrong with him that he couldn't even propose marriage without stammering like a bleedin' idiot?

"Ron?" She pulled away from him slightly so as to peer into his face, simultaneously taking his hand and intertwining his fingers in hers. "I think I understand what you're saying: You want us to make a promise to each other. That we'll be together no matter what happens—and that we'll one day...at some point...make it official. Right?"

"Well...right," he breathed, beyond relieved that she'd understood despite his stupid fumbling of words, and that they seemed to be on the same page. "I-I'll get you a ring after I've started work with Fred and George this summer and saved up a bit, a nice one with a—a big diamond."

A gentle smile lit up her pretty face, and she reached up to stroke his unshaven jaw; in the morning sunlight, every scattered freckle on her delicate features was clearly visible. "I don't need a diamond to be happy, Ron. It would be more practical to spend the money on the babies, don't you think?"

His jaw clenched in frustration as he tried to find the words to tell her that it was important to *him* that he be able to provide her with nice things, but he didn't know how to say it without coming off as...as barbaric or something, like she'd accused him of yesterday when they'd argued about her leaving the magical world.

"Yeah, you're prob'ly right," he finally forced out, deciding it best not to push the issue at the moment, 'cause the last thing he wanted was a row: His hangover seemed to have made a reappearance, and, 'sides, they'd been getting along so well as of late, and he didn't wanna blow it.

When she leaned in and kissed him slowly, her leg hooking around his calf, it drove all else from mind, and Ron felt like he would happily agree to anything if only it meant that he got to feel her silky lips sliding against his, her small hands on his face, her tongue melding with his still so timidly after all they'd done together...

When they at last broke apart once more, they were both grinning shyly.

"So...is that it, then?" he said, knowing how daft he sounded and not really caring. "We're... well...you know...?"

"Engaged?"

"Yeah, that," he replied, a somewhat giddy chortle erupting from his lips.

"So it would seem," she whispered fondly, kissing the tip of his nose.

"Do we...tell people, then?" He had no sodding clue how these things worked. "Y'know, make an announcement or something?"

She bit her lip, her eyebrows knitting together thoughtfully. "I think...that it would be best to only tell Harry for now," she finally said with an air of finality. "It would only cause unnecessary problems with Dad, and, considering that the children of Death Eaters attend Hogwarts, the fewer people amongst the student body who know, the better."

"Yeah. All right. Makes sense."

That annoying voice in the back of his mind that was always telling him he was rubbish—and which had been surprisingly silent as of late—made an unexpected reappearance, whispering that she was ashamed of being engaged to someone like him: someone poor and not particularly talented, smart, or good-looking.

Fuck off, he told that voice firmly. *If she didn't wanna be with me, then she wouldn't bloody be with me*. After all, Hermione wasn't the sorta girl to be with a bloke just 'cause he knocked her up, was she?

No sooner had he come to that conclusion than there was a rapid knock on the door, and Ron and Hermione both visibly jumped.

"Ron, Hermione," Jean's voice sounded from the other side of door, more brusque than Ron had ever heard her before. "Breakfast is ready. I expect you both dressed and downstairs in ten."

"Bloody hell," Ron groaned, rolling off the bed and looking around for his pants. "Your mum didn't sound very happy, did she?"

Hermione smiled grimly as she, too, began shuffling around for her clothing, red-faced and clearly mortified. "No, she didn't," she said after a moment, and then added defiantly, "but she'll have to get accustomed to it, won't she? She and Dad both; I'm not a child anymore, I'm going to be a mother soon, and we're in a relationship now, aren't we? An *adult* relationship."

He couldn't help but grin; she was really fucking cute when she was being rebellious.

oOo

Mum didn't say anything at breakfast that morning regarding the fact that she was very aware that her daughter and future son-in-law had spent the night together; in fact, she quickly resumed her usual good humor, and Hermione might have imagined her mother's stern tone outside the bedroom door.

That was, she *might* have imagined it if only she hadn't heard Jean Granger crying behind her closed bedroom door after Hermione and Ron had finished cleaning the kitchen and she'd wandered upstairs to check on Mum.

It was now blatantly apparent that Jean was taking her daughter's situation—forced impregnation and resultant impending motherhood—much harder than her outer demeanor would indicate, but it was nothing less than what Hermione had suspected all along: Her mother was attempting to make the best of an outwardly bad situation, and she was shielding Hermione from the more negative of her emotions.

She felt profoundly guilty at the confirmation and, aside from the occasional stolen snog, resolved to keep her hands—and her mouth, for that matter—to herself for the remainder of the Easter holidays, much to Ron's, and her own, obvious frustration.

Aside from their sexual tension, the last few days proved pleasant enough, and Hermione took immeasurable enjoyment in Ron's reaction to the opera on Saturday night and to watching children hunt Easter eggs in the park on Sunday morning.

"Muggle kids've got it easy," Ron commented in a whisper as they watched a small girl in a pink Easter bonnet gathering eggs by the pond. "No gnomes carrying off all the good toffee eggs. Ruddy little bastards, the lot of 'em."

"Ron!" she hissed, nudging his arm and indicating the girl, who was now frowning at them curiously.

"What? I meant the gnomes, not the kids. Oh—right—sorry."

Reaching toward the grass near the bench upon which they sat, Ron plucked up a bright yellow-painted egg and presented it to the child, who hesitated before shyly plucking it from his hand and scampering off with a giggle.

Hermione couldn't help but smile fondly as she watched this exchange.

"What?" he asked, seeming almost embarrassed as he turned back to face her.

"Nothing," she said, but she wasn't able to stifle her grin. "I just... It's endearing, seeing you interact with children, is all."

"Endearing, huh?" he murmured, and, despite the redness of his ears, he was clearly pleased by the comment. "I was going for 'manly,' but I'll take what I can get."

She laughed at that comment and suggested they go for a walk, chattering on as she clutched his hand about the similarities and differences between Muggle culture and magical in regard to holiday traditions...

Soon enough it was time to say goodbye to Mum and Dad, and, like when they'd returned from Christmas break, Gryffindor students were to Floo directly to Professor McGonagall's office rather than take the Hogwarts Express.

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Hermione commented, nudging Ron, after they'd stepped through the office door and were brushing soot from her clothing.

"Nah, your parents are all right. I'm glad I went with you."

Hermione slumped suddenly, her hands bracing against her knees as she was overcome by an unexpected wave of nausea. "Although, I'm not so sure that the Floo Network was the best option for me."

"Feeling sick?" Ron asked sympathetically, his arm slipping around her shoulders. "Want me to take you to Madam Pomfrey?"

She shook her head when Dean Thomas nearly tripped over them in his haste to get out of Professor McGonagall's office and presumably up to see Ginny. "No—no, it's passing. Let's just get to the common room..."

Gryffindor Tower was already brimming with activity, the common room filled with students donned in casual attire by the time Ron, Hermione, and Dean filed through the portrait hole: Their eyes immediately swept the crowded room, landing on Harry and Ginny, who were sitting close together on the couch by the fire.

Ron and Dean both visibly stiffened as Harry and Ginny seemed to fly apart at the sight of them; Hermione glanced up at Ron warily as she squeezed his hand and dragged him toward his best friend and sister.

As Harry stood and Hermione wrapped her arms around him in greeting, she whispered into his ear, "Ron and I have something we have to tell you."

Chapter 28: Ominous

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Ominous

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This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Twenty-One: The Unknowable Room.

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"You won't find anything in there," she chided Harry later that evening, watching him leaf through the Prince's book and feeling unaccountably annoyed that he was putting so much faith in the silly thing; as if this "Prince" character had all the answers. *Honestly.*

It had been several hours since Hermione had announced to Harry her engagement to Ron, and, although he'd seemed happy enough for them, it was quite apparent that the news was also a bit... unsettling: the idea that his two best friends weren't only expectant parents but would one day in the foreseeable future be husband and wife.

It would be a lot for anyone to take in, Hermione supposed, given how rocky her relationship with Ron had been in the past—and especially for Harry, given that he had witnessed them at their very best and at their very worst.

She herself had difficulty believing that mere weeks had passed since she hadn't been speaking to Ron; strange how things could change in such a relatively short timeframe.

"Don't start, Hermione," Harry replied wearily, his eyes glancing up from his book and landing on the fire roaring in the hearth; although spring was in full swing, the weather was still rather chill, especially at night. "If it hadn't been for the Prince, Ron wouldn't be sitting here now."

"He would if you'd just listened to Snape in our first year," she retorted to cover up how the comment had shaken her; she didn't want to think about what might have happened had Harry not thought of a bezoar. Or if there hadn't *been* a bezoar.

Looking at Ron as if to reassure herself that he was alive and well, she saw the he was still hunched over his Defense essay on the cushion next to her, struggling to complete it after having spent too much time that evening worrying aloud about their upcoming Apparition test.

She'd reminded him several times over Easter break about his essay and had advised him against saving it 'til last minute; she supposed that some things, at least, never changed.

Glancing about the common room to confirm that they were, in fact, utterly alone at this late hour, she persisted: "I'm telling you, the stupid Prince isn't going to be able to help you with this, Harry!" She couldn't seem to help herself; she was irritated that he apparently hadn't done much more over the holiday than pore over the Half-Blood Prince's book and flirt with Ginny. (Honestly, didn't he take Professor Dumbledore's assignment seriously?) "There's only one way to force someone to do what you want, and that's the Imperius Curse, which is illegal—"

"Yeah, I know that, thanks," he interrupted shortly, not bothering to look up from his book this time. "That's why I'm looking for something different. Dumbledore says Veritaserum won't do it, but there might be something else, a potion or a spell..."

"You're going about it the wrong way," she stated flatly. "Only you can get the memory, Dumbledore says. That must mean you can persuade Slughorn where other people can't. It's not a question of slipping him a potion, anyone could do that—"

"How d'you spell 'belligerent'?" Ron asked suddenly, speaking up for the first time in twenty minutes while shaking his quill and staring at his parchment. "It can't be B—U—M—"

"No, it isn't," Hermione concurred, pulling his essay toward her and peering down at the parchment. "And 'augury' doesn't begin O—R—G either. What kind of quill are you using?"

"It's one of Fred and George's Spell-Check ones...but I think the charm must be wearing off..."

"Yes, it must," she replied, unable to resist smiling a bit, "because we were asked how to deal with dementors, not 'Dugbogs,' and I don't remember you changing your name to 'Roonil Wazlib' either."

"Ah no!" Ron said, wrenching the parchment back toward himself and staring down in horror. "Don't say I'll have to write the whole thing out again!"

"It's okay, we can fix it," she soothed him, gently prying the essay from his hands and taking out her wand.

"I love you, Hermione," he replied with a relieved sigh, sinking back into the couch cushions and rubbing his eyes.

She couldn't help but flush at the casual way in which the words fell from his lips in Harry's presence, feeling both pleased and somewhat embarrassed; as for Ron, he didn't even seem to realize what he'd said.

There were several moments of silence while Hermione corrected Ron's essay, until Harry, seeming unable to resist, finally looked up from the Prince's book with a slight smirk gracing his features: "Still can't believe you're actually getting married. You sure no one Polyjuiced the two of you? I mean, three months ago you weren't even speaking to each other, and now you're going to be parents. *Married* parents. Blimey..." He paused momentarily, his grin widening as he said, "I'll be first in line to see Ron changing nappies; that's sure to be a sight."

Hermione bit her lip to suppress her smile, her cheeks warming as she tapped on the sixth or seventh "Dugbog" with her wand, watching it transform to "dementor." She found the thought of Ron changing nappies both amusing and endearing.

"Things change, mate," Ron said with a shrug from next to her, allowing his arm to fall casually on the back of the sofa behind her. "We just needed a kick in the right direction, is all, and I don't reckon changing nappies can be all that bad when it's your own kid, right?" His tone was simultaneously hopeful and a bit terrified.

"Sure, if you say so. Wouldn't really know, would I, since I don't have a kid and I've never changed a nappy."

"Well, you can practice with mine all you want, yeah?"

"Thanks, Ron, but I think I'll pass."

"It's not as if we've set a date, you know," Hermione spoke up as she finished correcting Ron's essay and looked up at the two boys. "It might not even happen before the delivery. The wedding, that is."

Ron turned to stare at her, seeming incredulous. "Might not—? What's your reason for wanting to wait so long, Hermione? Still holding out for Krum, are you?" His tone was light, but there was no mistaking the vulnerability behind his humor.

"Don't be absurd. I simply think that it's best not to rush into marriage. I thought that we might live together for a while, get accustomed to things—"

"What, you mean as like a test run?" Ron asked, all traces of amusement now absent from his voice as he turned to face her more fully, pulling his arm back in the process. "Give you time to decide whether or not you wanna chuck me before taking the plunge?"

This time, it was Hermione's turn to do the gaping as she tried to figure out what had gone wrong, where their wires had gotten crossed, so to speak. "Of course not, Ron," she finally said, attempting to keep her own rising irritation out of her tone. "You know that I love you. I've already promised myself to you, and I have no intentions whatsoever of reneging on that promise."

"Then why wait so long?" he repeated, his blue eyes shining with combined curiosity and something like hurt.

"Because...because we're both so young..."

"And?"

"And...well, there's no need to rush into—"

"You already said that," Ron pointed out flatly.

"Oh, honestly," she said while clamoring to her feet, pushing her hair out of her face with both hands in frustration as she rounded on him. "You're turning this into something that it's not, so I'll tell you what it *is*: I love you and want you—*you*, you big, daft lug, and no one else. But just because I'm pregnant doesn't mean we have to run off and get married! In any case, what happened to taking things slowly? And what if I wasn't pregnant? Would you still be so keen on getting married in the next two minutes?"

"Yes."

He spoke so lowly that it took Hermione several moments to determine whether or not she'd misunderstood.

"You heard right. Yes. There's a bloody war coming, isn't there? We could all be *dead* in six months, couldn't we? So I reckon that's as good a reason as any to get married—"

"Or perhaps it isn't," she countered, even as she winced at his bluntness regarding their possible premature deaths. "Maybe that's the very reason we *shouldn't* rush into it, if we're only doing it *because* of the war—"

"Fucking hell, haven't you been listening?" Ron interrupted, bounding to his feet as well and forcing her to crane her neck to meet his gaze. "We wouldn't be doing it 'cause o'the bleedin' war—but because we *love* each other and want to be together. At least, that's why *I'd* be doing it..."

His voice trailed off, his implication quite clear.

"Ron," she whispered, trying to stop the trembling of her lower lip, trying not to cry; abruptly, she recalled the conversation that they'd had several nights ago:

I wanna marry you, babies or not, he'd said. *There's a war coming, isn't there? I reckon that makes people think about the important things, y'know?*

True, he'd been inebriated, but Hermione hadn't questioned his sincerity; in fact, she'd reevaluated her own ideas about "the important things," hadn't she?

So, as Ron had asked her, *Why wait?*

Hermione had no doubt in her mind that she wanted to be with him, but she was a realist rather than a romantic: She had studied the statistics in cases involving teenage pregnancy amongst Muggles and wizards alike, and it rarely worked out between the young parents.

She recalled the thoughts she'd had last week regarding her fear of Ron changing his mind, and she knew that she should speak to him openly about her uncertainties—but she simply didn't know how to broach the subject without offending him.

A movement caught her eye then, and she saw that Harry, who had remained silent throughout her row with Ron and who had attempted to hide behind his battered copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* until now, was hastily trying to retreat without drawing attention to himself...

oOo

Ron and Hermione never got the chance to finish their argument 'cause they were interrupted at that moment by Dobby and Kreacher, who reported to Harry concerning Malfoy's recent activities and derailed the conversation entirely.

Even still, after they were through talking about the Room of Requirement and Crabbe and Goyle turning into girls, Hermione disappeared up to the girls' dormitories with a rather curt "goodnight"; she didn't even give him a kiss!

When he and Harry climbed up to their own dorm minutes later, it was well past midnight, and Dean, Seamus, and Neville were sound asleep, their snores filling the room. As Ron began to dress for bed in the semi-darkness, he glanced at Harry, craving some sort of advice about Hermione, but he and Harry didn't really talk about girls, did they? 'Specially when said girl happened to be Hermione. 'Sides which, his best mate already had that bleeding map out and was studying it by the light of his wand, undoubtedly obsessing over what Malfoy got up to in the Room of Requirement. (Ron had an idea, but he somehow doubted it's what Harry wanted to hear.)

Ron tossed and turned that night, his mind a whirlwind of activity: He was partly worried about Apparition, but mostly he couldn't stop thinking about Hermione and how he'd botched things up. Again.

Clearly, she wasn't ready for marriage, just like she wasn't ready for sex, just like she didn't wanna go hide out in the Muggle world—and Ron evidently couldn't seem to stop trying to pressure her into doing things she didn't wanna do.

What the hell was wrong with him, anyway? Why couldn't he just shut his bloody trap?

But then, he already knew the answer to that question, didn't he? He was aware that his own insecurities had driven him to persist about the whole marriage thing: He still wasn't quite convinced that he was good enough for her, so the news that she wanted to wait longer than he'd first realized led him to wonder *why*.

Yeah, all right, so they'd originally talked about taking things slowly, and Ron had thought he was okay with that, but now he was forced to admit to himself that maybe he wasn't as okay with it as

he'd initially thought: They were together, they loved each other, they were adults, they were gonna be parents in a matter of months. So why wait?

Bloody hell. Why did things always have to be so bleedin' complicated, anyway? As a child he was taught that if you were in love and of age, you got married. End o'story. Evidently Hermione was taught that if you were in love and of age, you lived together first to see if it would work, and *then* you got married several years down the line.

Even still, setting aside any cultural differences, he took comfort in her words: *I love you and want you—you, you big, daft lug, and no one else.*

He smiled in the dark, unaccountably pleased at being called a "big, daft lug," and eventually he fell asleep to fantasies about what his unborn children would be like, who they would grow up to be...

Ron was beyond relieved the next morning to discover that Hermione had apparently decided to forget about their row for the time being: She greeted him with a smile and a "good morning" that was decidedly warmer than her "goodnight" had been—though she looked much too tired for his liking, and he made a mental note to urge her to start going to bed a bit earlier.

In an unusual display of affection while in public and on school grounds, she even linked her arm through his as they made their way down to the Great Hall with Harry; Ron couldn't help but puff out his chest in pride, ignoring the occasional glance that lasted just a tad too long and the sporadic whisper in the corridors.

Let 'em talk. Who bloody cares?

The only truly unpleasant moment occurred when they approached the Gryffindor table and Lavender's eyes briefly locked on his from where she and Parvati sat with Seamus and Dean; that squirming guilt that had taken root in the pit of Ron's stomach and which he'd been ignoring roared to life rather abruptly at the expression on her face—which wasn't one of anger or resentment, or even jealousy, really, but, rather, of sadness and defeated acceptance.

Hermione, not missing this exchange, gently plied her arm from Ron's as they moved further down the long table, the three of them settling in a spot where other students hadn't yet congregated.

"I'm starved," Ron announced, deciding to forget about Lavender, as he'd already apologized and reckoned he couldn't do much else on that front, and proceeded to pile bacon and eggs on the empty plate before him. He ate while Hermione and Harry argued about Malfoy and Slughorn and what Harry should/shouldn't be doing with his free time, only chiming in when Hermione yanked the *Daily Prophet* out from under Harry's hand on the table and unfolded its pages, her eyes scanning back and forth rapidly. "Anyone we know—?"

"Yes!"

Ron and Harry choked on their breakfasts in unison.

"But it's all right, he's not dead," she hastened to explain. "It's Mundungus, he's been arrested and sent to Azkaban! Something to do with impersonating an Inferius during an attempted burglary..." She went on to explain about another bloke that Ron had never heard of disappearing and, even more disturbingly, a little boy that had been arrested for attempting to murder his grandparents while supposedly under the Imperius Curse.

Ron didn't want to think about that stuff, 'cause it reminded him of the ever-lurking threat of You-

Know-Who and the uncertainty of the months and years to come.

Suddenly, he was angry: He was angry at that sadistic sod for ruining what should be a happy time in Ron's life—engagement to the girl he loved and impending fatherhood—and for not just fucking off and going back to whatever hole he'd crawled out of; he even felt angry at Hermione for her stubborn refusal to go into hiding.

What if they came after her for being a Muggle-born and a friend of Harry's? Correction: A Muggle-born friend of Harry's who happened to be pregnant by a blood-traitor friend of Harry's. It wasn't exactly a stretch to think that that might make her a prime target, was it? People were disappearing left and right, and now kids were trying to kill their grandparents...

He shoved his plate aside, no longer feeling very hungry.

His foul mood persisted for the remainder of the day, which wasn't helped by Snape's snipe at him in Defense later that morning about his inability to Apparate; only an unexpected opportunity to goad Moaning Myrtle after class and Harry's encouragement about taking the additional Apparition practice sessions seemed to lift his spirits somewhat.

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The next morning, the day that she was to find out the genders of her babies, Hermione awoke with a start, feeling ill and struggling to hang on to the remnants of her disturbing dreams: She seemed to recall a circle of Death Eaters in what appeared to be a darkened stone passageway, possibly at Hogwarts, and Ron, an expression of sheer agony and terror on his blood-smeared face; somehow more memorable than that image, however, was the general ominous sense of hopeless desperation and sorrow...

Yet the quicker that consciousness overtook her, the quicker those tattered threads disintegrated into nothingness, leaving her shaking and disoriented, her stomach churning violently as she sat up in her still-darkened dormitory. Hermione literally rolled out of bed and stumbled toward the loo, barely making it to the toilet in time.

Sagging against the cold tiles several moments later and still trembling violently, she squeezed her eyes closed and took deep, even breaths, struggling to calm her racing heart.

She would have to tell Madam Pomfrey about her nightmares and her physiological reaction to them at her appointment today, but she would request to speak with her privately, without Ron being present; she didn't relish the idea of keeping things from him, but she didn't see the point in worrying him needlessly, either—especially since he was already so worried about his Apparition test.

After splashing cold water on her face and taking several deep gulps of the heavenly liquid, Hermione slipped back into the dormitory. By the light of the moon, she saw that while Parvati slumbered on, oblivious to the world around her, Lavender was sitting up in bed as if she'd been waiting for her dorm mate to reemerge from the bathroom.

As their eyes met, Lavender opened her mouth as if to speak; seeming to think better of it in the next instant, however, she instead laid back down and pulled her pillow over her head.

Despite the fact that it wasn't quite five o'clock in the morning, Hermione experienced an acute urge to put some distance between herself and her dormitory. In any case, additional sleep didn't seem likely, so she quickly showered and dressed before gathering her books and slipping quietly from the room, heading to the library.

Chapter End Notes

I would again like to thank my readers who have followed me over here from FFnet; I'm aware that it's an inconvenience, & I'm truly sorry about that. Believe me, it's inconvenient for me as well, LOL.

Even still, I refuse to give up on this story & to be brought down. I may have lost the almost 2,000 reviews that I had garnered on FFnet, but at the end of the day, although I'm VERY appreciative of those who take the time to let me know they're following along & taking enjoyment from my efforts, I ultimately write for the love of the characters & so that I can entertain those who might take pleasure from my work. So, again, thank you for your continued support despite the inconvenience.

Also, although I've already informed my FFnet readers of this, The Waiting Place has been nominated for Best AU, Best Ron, & Best Hermione in the Romione Awards ([romioneawards . tumblr . com](http://romioneawards.tumblr.com)), and voting is ongoing throughout the month of August. (I will be posting the full list of my nominations in my author's profile.)

If you're not a member of this site & wish to receive notifications of my updates for this story, I always post update announcements on my Twitter: Kari_FicFanatic

In addition, I will be posting my updates on my tumblr: [musingsofaticfanatic . tumblr . com](http://musingsofaticfanatic.tumblr.com)

-Kari

Chapter 29: Put to Bed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Put to Bed

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Twenty-One: The Unknowable Room.

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Ron found that he couldn't eat that morning he was so nervous/excited about finding out if the twins were going to be girls or boys—or one of each; Hermione couldn't seem to eat either, but Ron guessed that, unlike him, her lack of an appetite was more to do with one of her regular bouts of morning sickness than nerves.

"C'mon, love," he implored, pushing her quickly-cooling bowl of porridge in her direction. After all, he'd promised both their mothers that he'd take care of her, and he had every intention of doing just that. "You need to at least *try* to eat something."

"You're one to talk," she fired back, eyeing his untouched plate of sausages and eggs. "You haven't touched your breakfast."

"Yeah, but I'm not the one who's eating for three, am I?"

She raised an eyebrow at that as she glanced up from the *Daily Prophet*. "Judging by the amount of food that you typically consume, one might think differently."

"Oi, do you two ever stop?" Ginny Weasley said loudly, plopping down across from Hermione and cheerfully loading up her plate with potatoes and bacon. Turning to Harry, she added, "You'd think that with a bit o'shagging outta their systems they'd be less keen to bicker. Guess I was wrong about that."

When Harry choked on his pumpkin juice, Ginny laughed and patted his back.

"Right, then, I reckon that's our cue to leave," Ron said shortly, his ears heating up; if he didn't leave now, he might say something to land him on the other end of his sister's worst Bat-Bogey Hex, something he'd rather avoid, fuck you very much.

Pulling a somewhat startled Hermione up by her hand, he practically dragged her through the Hall.

"Hey, you git," Ginny called after him, her tone good-natured, "you'd best let me know if I'm having nieces or nephews so I'll know to buy pink or blue!"

Ron responded with a rude hand gesture, not caring whether any of the teachers saw, but he couldn't help but grin affectionately, suddenly feeling a bit giddy with nervous anticipation. "That sister o'mine," he murmured with a shake of his head as he and Hermione left the Hall and made their way up the marble staircase. "Right pain in the arse, isn't she?"

"Mm, must run in the family," she commented, a small smile turning up the corners of her lips while she graced him with a meaningful sideways glance.

"Haha, hilarious."

"I wasn't trying to be funny, merely truthful..."

Minutes later, Hermione was lying on a bed in the empty hospital wing, clutching Ron's hand as Madam Pomfrey waved her wand over the young witch's belly, muttering incantations under her breath; she periodically glanced at the clipboard clutched in her other hand, much as the medi-witch at St. Mungo's had done.

Ron could hardly stand it: His heart felt like it was going to beat itself right out of his chest or...or explode or something as he and Hermione looked at each other, waiting with bated breath to see what Madam Pomfrey would say...

After what seemed an eternity, the Healer lowered her wand and glanced between the young couple, her stern but intelligent eyes landing on their intertwined fingers. "Well, there's no doubt about it: You're definitely having one of each. Congratulations, Granger, Weasley."

Ron stared at her for several prolonged heartbeats, weighing the elder witch's words: *One of each. One of Each.* "You—you mean we're having a—a boy *and* a girl?" he finally stammered, needing to hear the words.

"Yes, Weasley, that is most decidedly what I meant by 'one of each,'" Madam Pomfrey replied in a tone of amusement, a hint of a smile playing on her lips as she cocked an eyebrow.

A boy *and* a girl.

Fuck. Me.

"Ron!"

His head whipped in Hermione's direction, who had sat up on the bed and swung her legs over the side; he was startled by her outburst for several sluggish moments until realization struck him: "I said that out loud, didn't I?" He had a feeling his ears were as red as his hair.

"Yes, you most certainly did." Her tone somehow encompassed consternation, amusement, and embarrassment.

"Sorry, but...really, who cares?" he said in exasperation. "We're having a boy and a girl, Hermione! One of each!" He was already picturing them in his head, little miniature versions of himself and Hermione, but blended somehow: A boy with an impish grin and Hermione's eyes that he could teach to play chess and to fly a broomstick, and a little girl with freckles and her mother's brains and beauty that he could *also* teach to play chess and to fly a broom... He'd never been so fucking excited about anything in his life, and Hermione was gazing back at him, his own joy reflected in her pretty face.

"Although still in its early stages, the pregnancy is progressing accordingly," Madam Pomfrey said, drawing the couple's attention back to the business at hand. "You have two healthy, appropriately-developing eight-week-old fetuses. On that note, how have you been feeling, Ms. Granger?"

"I'm...okay. The nausea is sporadic, but the potion helps quite a bit." She hesitated as she glanced at Ron, seeming to come to some sort of decision before adding, "I haven't been sleeping very well, if truth be told. I have these startlingly vivid nightmares that leave me more exhausted than when I went to sleep...and I wake up trembling and sick and weak..."

Ron frowned as he took that in: She'd told him about the nightmares last week, but not about the getting-sick part.

"That's perfectly natural," Madam Pomfrey assured them both. "It's common, even under normal circumstances—and I think we'll all agree that these circumstances are hardly normal—for expectant mothers to experience varying degrees of nightmares and sleep deprivation as a result of stress. With your regular morning sickness on top of that, your physiological reaction is understandable."

Hermione nodded as she absorbed the Healer's words.

"Would you like me to give you something to help you sleep?"

"Yes, I think that would be wise." She exchanged a glance with Ron. "It's important that I stay on top of my schoolwork."

"What's important," Madam Pomfrey said as she waved her wand and summoned a bottle from her office, "is that you get plenty of sleep, maintain a healthy diet, and try to keep your stress levels to a minimum. Here, take a moderate swallow of this just before bed each night," she added, handing the bottle to Hermione. "It should help, but I want you to inform me if the nightmares continue to persist. Now, do either of you have any questions for me?"

"Can she Apparate?" Ron blurted suddenly, then blushed when the two witches both turned to stare at him. "We have Apparition tests coming up, see."

"Yes, Apparition is perfectly safe during the first trimester," Madam Pomfrey responded, turning back to the younger witch, "although I would highly recommend that you take your nausea potion beforehand. Any other questions?"

Again, Ron and Hermione exchanged a glance before shaking their heads; in truth, Ron had wondered if he should ask if sex was okay during pregnancy—just in case she changed her mind—but he was mortified just *thinking* about asking Madam Pomfrey something like that. 'Sides, he didn't wanna embarrass Hermione.

"Do either of you desire any sort of counsel? I realize that your mental wellbeing and discussing your future prospects is your Head of House's responsibility, but if you wish to speak to a Mind Healer for any reason—"

"No, thank you," Hermione said quickly. "I'm fine. Ron and I are both fine, aren't we?"

There was something in her voice that had him turning to stare at her, quirking an eyebrow while silently asking, *Are you really fine, Hermione?* He suddenly wasn't so sure about that. However, at her imploring look he found himself clearing his throat and saying, "Yeah. Yeah, we're good."

There was a lingering pause before Madam Pomfrey responded, "Very well. Ms. Granger, if you have any other problems or questions, don't hesitate to come see me. Otherwise, I'll want to see you again in four weeks... In the meantime, I shall update Professor McGonagall on your condition."

Once the next appointment had been scheduled and Madam Pomfrey had written them a note excusing them for being late to their next lesson, Ron and Hermione left the hospital wing, walking slowly, both lost in their own thoughts: Ron was excited about the idea of having a boy and a girl, but he was also worried about Hermione—and not just about the nightmares.

He couldn't help but wonder now—and he wasn't sure why it had never occurred to him before—whether her hesitancy about having sex again had less to do with wanting to take things slowly

like she'd said and more to do with her having experienced some sort of trauma at the way she'd lost her virginity. Even though Ron knew it wasn't his fault, and that he'd actually saved her life, he couldn't help but feel a bit guilty about the whole bloody thing.

Maybe she *should* talk to someone—especially if she didn't feel comfortable talking to him about it. Although the idea that she wasn't being completely open with him stung a bit, he had to admit, he was making a real effort to keep in mind that this wasn't about *him*. Not really.

They had just ducked beneath a tapestry, and he'd just opened his mouth to (gently) suggest she take Madam Pomfrey's advice when, much to his astonished delight, Hermione's arms flew around his neck, her lips crashing insistently into his.

oOo

She knew what he was thinking; she could see it written all over his face—and although Hermione couldn't deny that she felt that her choice had been taken away from her, she experienced the strongest urge to put his insecurities to bed. So to speak.

She had to make him know that she loved him and desired him even if she wasn't yet ready for marriage or sex; she had to make him know that she didn't blame him for what had happened in any way, shape, or form—and that he'd in fact been just as much a victim of that vile potion as she had.

She had to make him know that she was excited by the prospect of birthing his children. There was something...undeniably sexy in the thought that Ron had planted inside her a bit of himself that was now growing and thriving, two very real, very alive beings, a little boy and a little girl...

As they slipped beneath a tapestry and turned into an abandoned passageway, Hermione rather abruptly threw her arms around his neck and kissed him desperately, pouring all the love and passion she felt for him into this single heated embrace; Ron's arms slid tightly around her waist as he backed her almost roughly against the stone wall between a pillar and a suit of armor, partially concealing them.

"I love you," she whispered in a breathy, fierce gasp when she wrenched her lips from his and looked up into his eyes; flames from a nearby torch danced in his irises. "Ron, I love you."

"I love you, Hermione," he growled in urgent response, his large hands coming up to frame her face. "I love you so fucking much. Doncha know you're it for me, sweetheart?" His eyes shone with sincerity and adoration and fire and lust. "You're all I'll ever fucking want, Hermione. Don't you ever doubt that, y'hear me?"

Doncha know you're it for me, sweetheart? You're all I'll ever fucking want, Hermione. Don't you ever doubt that, y'hear me?

Tears sprang to her eyes at the magnitude of the sheer joy and relief that coursed through her body at his words and expression, reducing her to nothing more than an incoherent mass of nerve-endings and raw emotions.

Did he somehow guess, even on a subconscious level, the horrible doubts about his devotion to her that had plagued her thoughts? Was this his way now of conveying that he desired to put to bed her own fears as much as she did his?

She didn't know. It didn't matter. All she knew was that she was kissing him again, aggressively, fueled by love and lust in equal measure, her hands gripping his hair none-too-gently as her tongue delved into his mouth, battling eagerly with his, and her head spun dizzily, her vision

literally blurring...

Hermione was trembling as his large, warm hands ran along her outer thighs and bunched her skirt up around her hips, his thumbs grazing along the top of her knickers just before he hiked her leg over his hip. She knew in that moment that she was too weak to resist him this time, even if she wanted to—which she didn't, she realized. In fact, she was so far gone that she couldn't even bring herself to care that they were both prefects and in a very public corridor; no matter how seemingly abandoned, someone could walk by at any moment and discover them.

There was something oddly appealing about the danger in that idea. Exciting, even.

"So fucking sexy," Ron was whispering against her flesh, his voice ragged, as he nipped her throat on a downward trail while grinding his arousal into her belly in an unfettered display of desire. When his lips reached her tie, his hands came up suddenly, impatiently undoing it while muttering curses under his breath; he then unceremoniously yanked her burdensome uniform shirt open, sending the buttons flying, before shoving her bra up over her breasts.

Quite unexpectedly, all movement ceased as Ron wrenched his lips from her throat and gazed down unabashedly at her exposed chest; his breathing came in shallow pants, his eyes clouded by unmistakable desire while he absorbed her, adulation adorning those features that she loved so much.

Hermione's chest heaved as she waited to see what he'd do next, her body and mind in a state beyond mere excitement...

He let out an animalistic sound that vaguely resembled her name as he captured her wrists in one massive grip and pinned them over her head; his other grabbed her bum beneath her skirt, his fingers delving into her knickers from behind. Hermione arched against him, crying out as, without warning, he plunged three fingers deeply inside her...

"Fuck, you're wet," he groaned, his forehead now pressed against hers as he fucked her slowly but steadily with his long, thick fingers. "You needed this, huh?"

When she couldn't manage anything more than a helpless moan, her head lolling back against the stone wall, he switched tactics, pulling his fingers from her body and shifting back slightly so as to hastily shove her knickers down her hips before his hand found her core once more. He rapidly stroked her clitoris with two fingers, her hips gyrating against him in encouragement, and when her body at last began to succumb to an earth-shattering release, Ron abruptly plummeted his fingers into her slick sex; he fucked her hard in that manner, pushing her beyond the very threshold of her pleasure while whispering words of encouragement into her ear...

By the time the world righted itself, and he released her wrists and stepped back slightly, allowing her leg that had been draped over his hip to slide to the floor, Hermione realized that she'd bitten down hard on his throat in an effort to stifle her moans of pleasure.

However, he was far from complaining.

"Did that feel good, 'Ermione?" Ron whispered, a cocky smirk on his handsome face that would put Draco Malfoy to shame as he gripped her waist with one hand. "Fancy it a bit rough, do you?"

When she bit her lip and smiled, feeling unaccountably shy while her body hummed in the aftermath of her climax, he lifted the hand that he'd just used to finger her and languidly rubbed circles around her nipples, plucking gently, effectively coating them with her juices. Once pebbled, he arched down and took them into his full mouth one at a time, groaning against her flesh, seeming to savor her taste.

Hermione gasped, craving him anew, her fingernails digging into his scalp when he began thrusting against her once more...

"Ron," she whispered, slowly drawing his head up and forcing him to meet her gaze: The surge that sparked between them in that instant was tangible, a living, breathing thing as their lips met once more in a frenzied kiss. On impulse, she reached between their bodies and squeezed that insistent bulge in his trousers, eliciting a deep, shuddering groan as he deepened the kiss almost frantically. Spurred on by his passion, she quickly undid his trousers and slipped her hand in his pants, stroking him rapidly, eager to bring him physical gratification as he'd done for her, to show him that she loved him.

"Ron, I love you so much," she whispered for emphasis when their lips broke apart.

He whimpered in response, his head falling to her shoulder as he thrust into her palm instinctively, already perilously close to orgasm. When his body began to quake, and she knew he wouldn't last much longer, she abruptly turned and pushed him against the wall, sinking to her knees and taking him into her mouth...

"Er-my-nee...fuuuck..."

Swallowing the semen that pulsed into the back of her throat, she looked up to see that he had his knuckles shoved in his mouth, stifling his pants and groans of pleasure as his eyes rolled back in his head, and his other hand was currently fisted in her hair...

When it was over, and Ron had gently helped her climb to her feet once more, reality slowly dawned on her. Hermione glanced around, feeling somewhat startled while hastily summoning her buttons and repairing her uniform.

She'd just... They'd just...done *that* in a very public corridor...at Hogwarts.

"That was bloody wicked," Ron commented, tucking himself back into his trousers and straightening his own uniform, mischief glinting in his blue eyes. "Think we might have to assign ourselves detentions, though, being prefects and all."

"I think we may have to *expel* ourselves for that, actually," she returned, but she was smiling.

"Bollocks. Prefects don't have the power to expel people, Hermione."

"Right. Then I suppose we should report ourselves to McGonagall straight away."

There was a pause as they looked at each other, and then they broke out into sudden laughter at once.

"A boy *and* a girl!" Hermione finally said when she'd calmed enough to speak, her arm slipping around his waist as they began to walk together, resuming their course to Gryffindor Tower to retrieve their books. "What do you think about 'Gertrude' for a girl?"

"I think you're barking."

"'Bertha'?"

"Now you're seriously starting to worry me, Hermione."

"Honestly, Ron, I'm only taking the Mickey. You know, you really should lighten up..."

Chapter End Notes

Gratuitous smut FTW! ;p

What, no cliffhanger this time? Are you disappointed? Also, believe me when I say that had this chapter been any lengthier I wouldn't have updated today, but I'm shooting for another update a week from today if not sooner, so keep your eyes peeled. ;)

Once more, I'd like to thank you all for your continued support despite the inconvenience of having to follow me to another site, as well as your outrage on my behalf, despite the fact that I'm the one who was ultimately at fault: All of your comments on Twitter, tumblr, your PMs & DMs, & your reviews expressing your support of me & my fics are more appreciated than you could possibly know. *hugs*

Reminder: Voting in the Romione Awards is still ongoing:
romioneawards.tumblr.com

(The full list of my nominations is available in my author's profile.) I encourage readers to support their favorite authors & fics by getting to the ballot & voting while they still can!

-Kari

Chapter 30: Something's Coming

The Waiting Place

Chapter Thirty: Something's Coming

oOo

This chapter begins in HBP Chapter Twenty-One: The Unknowable Room, and continues through Chapter Twenty-Five: The Seer Overheard.

oOo

The last two months of the term seemed to dissolve away, the virtual chill in the air and the perpetual cloud cover giving way to bright patches of sunlight, more frequent days of warmth that had students shedding their robes and ties, and a colorful array of flowers popping up out of the grounds around the castle.

For Hermione, those days flitted by in a haze of studying, arguing with Ron about the pros and cons of cloth nappies over disposable ones, stubborn bouts of morning sickness, prefect duties, arguing with Ron about the perks of living in the city as opposed to the country, pestering Harry about procuring that memory from Slughorn, arguing with Ron about baby names (a battle that she was starting to think wouldn't be won before the delivery), and, when he happened to catch her in the right mood, getting off with Ron in a deserted classroom after their prefect rounds, or, if the weather was nice—such as the Sunday of their extra Apparition practice sessions in Hogsmeade—down by the lake when no one else was around...

To his credit, Ron didn't press her to go any further physically and allowed her to set the pace during their infrequent heavy snogging/petting sessions; however, despite still harboring qualms about engaging in physical intimacy with him once more, Hermione couldn't suppress her body's growing desire for him, especially as pregnancy seemed to render her particularly randy.

She shivered just thinking about how adept he'd become at using his mouth and hands to bring her extraordinary pleasure, and of the desperate thrusts of his hips when she touched him, the way he'd raggedly moan her name.... If truth be told, she wasn't sure how much longer she could hold out. For that matter, she wasn't certain what she was holding out *for*, exactly; all she knew was that as exciting as she found the thought of making love with him again, it concurrently left her breathless with the force of her anxiety.

She couldn't help but wonder, as awful as the idea was, if this was, to a lesser extent, what rape victims experienced: Although Hermione hadn't been raped (not by Ron, at any rate), the fact remained that her choice had been taken from her. Ron's had as well, in fact, but he seemed far less affected by it; quite the contrary, he was eager to have sex again, despite acquiring the maturity to rein himself in for her sake.

Similarly, she and Ron came to a sort of unspoken agreement for the time being not to argue over when, exactly, they should have the wedding: Their passionate display in the corridor immediately following the discovery of the twins' genders seemed to have effectively stanchied their insecurities—their feelings of doubt and inadequacy—leaving neither to question the other's feelings or intentions.

Likewise, Ron seemed to have accepted that Hermione would, at the very least, finish out the school year at Hogwarts, as he hadn't once since Easter break broached the subject of going into

hiding, even when the *Prophet* reminded them daily of the growing bleakness of the world around them; in those moments, Hermione stuck to her refrain: "Forget about Malfoy and what he's doing in the Room of Requirement!" she'd hiss at Harry in exasperation, attempting to press upon him the importance of the task that the Headmaster had assigned him. "What you need to be concentrating on is trying to get that memory from Slughorn!" After all, if Dumbledore was adamant that Harry obtain that memory, then it was all to do with defeating Voldemort, wasn't it? And as long as Voldemort was out there, there was no hope for anyone's futures: not hers, not Harry's, not Ron's, and not her unborn children's.

On that note, her nightmares about Bellatrix Lestrange's mad cackle and faceless Death Eaters persisted, although they weren't nearly as pervasive as before, thanks to the potion that Madam Pomfrey had given her. Additionally, her bouts of nausea, while infrequent, snuck up on her at the most inopportune moments: Most of her teachers, particularly Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick, were understanding and had given her special permission to leave without asking at any time during a lesson should she require the loo.

Professor Snape, unsurprisingly, wasn't as sympathetic.

It was the day before she and Ron were to take their Apparition tests, and Snape was giving a lecture on the best way of vanquishing Dugbogs: Pansy Parkinson, sitting two rows in front of her own, had worn quite a lot of perfume, and Hermione tried her hardest to stifle her reactive nausea at the overpowering scent, yet it proved unrelenting as the lesson progressed.

Glancing at Ron, who was doodling absently in the margins of his book—something that would ordinarily have her scolding him—Hermione's hand shot up in the air; Snape's black eyes flashed toward her coolly, yet she didn't miss his slight smirk as he continued to give his lecture, ignoring her altogether.

"Please—sir," she said desperately, silently praying that she wouldn't vomit right there on her desk.

Snape sighed dramatically as his eyes pierced hers once more. "Yes, Miss Granger? Might I inquire as to what is so direly urgent that you feel inclined to interrupt my lecture? Perhaps it is your wish to come up here and teach the lesson yourself, as you've memorized the texts and seem to pride yourself on your incessant ability at regurgitating facts?"

Pansy giggled as she craned her neck to peer back at Hermione, but Draco seemed to be ignoring the exchange completely, his blond head tilted toward his desk. Out of the corners of her eyes, Hermione saw that Harry and Ron's eyes were narrowed as they glanced between her and Snape.

"No, thank you, sir," she said quickly, flushing in anger and embarrassment. "It's just—may I be excused to use the toilet?—I'm feeling a bit ill..."

There was a long pause as Snape regarded her, one eyebrow quirked in apparent nonchalance. "While some of your professors may offer you preferential treatment, Miss Granger," he finally said, slowly, "I am not one of them. Quite frankly, your...situation,"—he spat the word like it was something dirty—"is not my problem—"

"It's not her fault!" Ron suddenly boomed, seeming unable to help himself as he bounded to his feet next to her. "Just let 'er go to the fucking loo!"

"No, Weasley, from what I understand it's *your* fault," he countered smoothly, eliciting snickers from the Slytherins. "Ten points from Gryffindor for your inability to control your outbursts."

Looking up at him, Hermione saw that Ron was fuming, his fists balled at his sides, his face as red

as his hair...

"Ron," she whispered soothingly, tugging on his sleeve, "it's okay, it's not worth—"

"No, it's not bloody *okay*, Hermione," he said, wrenching his arm from her grasp. "It's this *school's* fucking fault," he all but shouted, turning his sudden fury on Snape, "and you're gonna stand there and refuse her right to use the fucking *loo*?"

Hermione squeezed her eyes closed, fighting off the nausea as she silently pleaded with Ron to stop while whispers erupted around the classroom.

"Silence!" Snape suddenly bellowed in a rare outburst. "Detention, Weasley, for your impertinence. For a month. Sit back down and see me after class."

Ron visibly seethed as he reluctantly flopped back down in his chair. "Fine." Then he added in a low voice for only Harry and Hermione to hear, "Fucking git."

oOo

"You know, you really must learn to control your temper a bit better."

Ron, Hermione, and Harry were on a break between lessons, sitting together in a secluded corner of the courtyard.

"Hermione," Ron said in a tone of exaggerated patience as his rage flared anew, absently watching a trail of ants wind their way through a crevice in the stone. "He refused your right to the loo, treated you like rubbish, like...like something stuck to the bottom of his bloody *shoe*—"

"I know what he did, Ron," she replied with a weary sigh. "I just don't understand what you were hoping to accomplish, is all."

"I was defending your honor, that's what I was bloody—"

"And I appreciate your loyalty—really, it's one of the qualities I love most about you—but now you've a month's worth of detentions, so what did you accomplish, really, other than giving Snape the satisfaction of punishing you?"

Ron stared at her, aghast.

"Hermione's got a point, mate," Harry spoke up, absently nudging a pebble with his toe. "The git was trying to get a rise outta you, and now 'cause you took the bait you'll miss practice the remainder o'the season unless I can convince Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw to switch evenings with me..."

"Yeah, 'cause we all know you've never let that wanker get t'you," Ron bit back sarcastically. "And excuse the fuck outta me for defending my fiancée and the mother of my children."

Only when he noticed Hermione's cheeks turn faintly pink, clearly pleased—or maybe embarrassed, or both—did he realize what he'd said. *Fiancée*. It was the first time he'd ever called her that out loud.

A silence descended on the trio after that; Harry pulled out the Prince's book and absently flipped through its pages, a slight smile tugging up the corners of his lips.

"He *is* a git, you know. Snape," Hermione said quietly, suddenly, breaking the silence as she reached out and squeezed Ron's hand while smiling gently up at him.

"I'll second that," Harry agreed, his own grin widening as he looked up from his book, "and I reckon if it'd been *my* fiancée I'd've taken the bait as well."

"Yeah, well, I don't know what sorta bird in 'er right mind would marry the likes o'*you*," Ron retorted, his spirits lifted.

"A right brilliant one, I reckon. What *I* don't get is how Hermione's gonna put up with your snoring when you two finally shack up..."

"There are some excellent Silencing Charms that'll work wonderfully for that purpose," she spoke up from where she sat cross-legged on the ground, not even glancing up at the two boys as she turned the page of a heavy, ancient-looking volume that was propped open in her lap.

"Some light reading, eh?" Ron commented teasingly with a nod at her book.

"I'm still searching for information on Horcruxes in my spare time," she explained, finally looking up and shaking her long, thick hair behind her shoulders. "I still haven't been able to find any other references. It's so frustrating! I even wrote to Flourish and Blotts a while back—and they have nothing on the subject! Harry—"

"I know, I'm trying, Hermione," he cut in, just a tad shortly. "I've stayed late after Potions every day; he doesn't wanna talk to me!"

"Well, you'll just have to keep at it, then, won't you?"

The very next day, however, things changed for the better when Ron, just before he and Hermione were to head into Hogsmeade to take their Apparition tests, thought of using the Felix Felicis to wheedle the memory from Slughorn: "Lucky. Harry, that's it—get lucky!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Use your lucky potion!"

"Ron, that's—that's it!" said Hermione, sounding entirely too surprised for Ron's liking. "Of course! Why didn't I think of it?"

Ron didn't prove nearly as lucky during his Apparition examination later that day, having just failed for rather unfortunately leaving behind half an eyebrow, but, conversely, Harry's use of the Felix Felicis that night to extract the memory from Slughorn was a success. In Charms the next morning he relayed to Ron and Hermione what had transpired down at Hagrid's and the contents of the memory—how young Tom Riddle had spoken to Slughorn about dividing his soul into seven pieces and concealing the fragments in magical artifacts known as "Horcruxes"—as well as Dumbledore's promise to Harry.

"Wow," Ron kept saying. "Wow. You're actually going to go with Dumbledore...and try and destroy...wow."

That same day a couple of other fortunate—in Ron's opinion—events occurred: He and Harry found out from Hermione that Ginny and Dean had split up the night before, something that Harry seemed entirely too interested in for Ron's liking, and, more significantly, Katie Bell had finally returned from St. Mungo's, which, aside from meaning that Gryffindor now had a more-than-decent chance at beating Ravenclaw in the upcoming match and thus remaining in the running for the House Cup, meant that they might finally find out if what had happened to her could somehow be linked to Ron's poisoning and Hermione's accident.

"No," Katie replied when Harry questioned her on whether or not she could remember who gave

her the necklace. "Everyone's been asking me, but I haven't got a clue. The last thing I remember was walking into the ladies' in the Three Broomsticks."

"You definitely went into the bathroom, then?" asked Hermione.

"Well, I know I pushed open the door, so I suppose whoever Imperiused me was standing just behind it. After that, my memory's blank until about two weeks ago in St. Mungo's." There was a hesitant pause before Katie's eyes flashed between Hermione and Ron. "Hey, I heard about what happened to you two," she said, lowering her voice, "that you spent some time in St. Mungo's yourselves, and I'm not sure what to say... Are...are you all right?"

"We're fine," Hermione replied, smiling bravely as she glanced up at Ron and slipped her hand into his; he squeezed her smaller palm instinctively, touched by the blatant gesture of affection. "It's not something we ever expected, but we're adapting well."

Katie nodded as she smiled tightly in return, clearly unsure whether it would be more appropriate to offer her congratulations or her condolences. "Well, that's good, then," she said after a moment, looking directly at Hermione. "Listen, I'd better go, I wouldn't put it past McGonagall to give me lines even if it is my first day back, but if you ever need to talk or something..."

"Thank you," Hermione said appreciatively while Katie gathered up her books and bag, smiled one more time in acknowledgment, and hurried off to catch up with her friends who'd only recently clamored through the portrait hole.

"So it must have been a girl or a woman who gave Katie the necklace, to be in the ladies' bathroom," Hermione deduced as she, Ron, and Harry sat down at a table by a window in the mostly-deserted common room.

"Or someone who looked like a girl or a woman," Harry pointed out. "Don't forget, there was a cauldron full of Polyjuice Potion at Hogwarts. We know some of it got stolen..."

As April came to a close, however, and the pleasant, sunny days of May slid languidly by, Ron almost managed to forget that Hermione's pregnancy was the result of ill-fated and possibly malicious circumstances, and he looked forward to fatherhood and living with Hermione with a renewed excitement. He even managed to lock up in a drawer in the back of his mind his worries about Voldemort and his Horcruxes, and an uncertain future as he focused on Hermione and the upcoming match that would determine the Championship.

They'd switched out with Hufflepuff their scheduled practices due to Ron's weekly detentions with Snape, and he was flying better than ever and saving goals like they were nothing; Ron was coming to think of Hermione as his very own Felix Felicis, 'cause all he had to do was think about the promise of stealing an extra snog or two with her—or more—and he could do no wrong.

Even Harry's unfortunate run-in with Draco Malfoy in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom that ended in a whole lotta blood—Draco's blood, not Harry's—only put a slight damper on Ron's euphoria. The news that Harry would be forced to sit out the final match as punishment was bad news as well, but that couldn't be helped, could it?

As it happened, though, Gryffindor managed to win the match, and thereby the Cup, even without their captain present: "We won!" Ron bellowed the instant he'd helped pull Harry through the portrait hole after the prat had finally made his way up from the dungeons. "We won! Four hundred and fifty to a hundred and forty! We won!"

Ron was feeling a bit gobsmacked when Ginny, running out of nowhere, flung herself at Harry and snogged him like there was no tomorrow right there in front of the whole of Gryffindor

House. In spite of this obscene display between his best mate and little sister, when Hermione's arms slid around Ron's waist in the next moments, her lips attaching themselves to his scratchy throat and effectively distracting him, he thought, *Fuck it, let 'em have their fun.*

'Cause as Hermione pulled him toward the portrait hole, grinning up at him in that wicked way that she reserved only for him, Ron knew without a bloody doubt that he was gonna have *his*.

oOo

Hermione wrung her hands as she paced, unable to suppress the ominous feeling that had stolen over her, leaving her shaken with a cold sense of dread and fear—a feeling that she had come to associate with her nightmares.

Something was coming.

Something was going to happen. Soon. She didn't know how or why. She just *knew*.

Stop it! she ordered herself; she was on edge for a number of reasons, was all. Logically, she knew she was being absurd.

"D'you reckon he found one?" Ron asked for about the twentieth time.

They were in front of the fireplace in the common room well after curfew as they waited for Harry, who'd been summoned to Professor Dumbledore's office quite a while ago now.

"I don't know," she answered for about the twentieth time. "Maybe."

"What d'you reckon it could be?" he asked, referring to the possible Horcrux that Dumbledore might or might not have found.

"Anything, I suppose," Hermione replied patiently as she flopped down next to him on the sofa, throwing a glance about the room at the scattered students still up and playing cards or reading or talking quietly. "But we shouldn't discuss it here."

"Right." Ron fell silent as he licked his lips and gave her a meaningful sideways glance. "Wanna go somewhere more private while we wait for 'im?" he asked hopefully.

Hermione couldn't resist rolling her eyes, torn between annoyance and amusement. "Honestly, is that all you think about?" she asked, but there was no real heat behind her words. "Besides, it's after curfew, and we're prefects."

"So? That's never stopped you before," Ron pointed out, a roguish lopsided grin spreading across his handsome face. "Who was it that pushed me into that classroom after rounds the other night and practically attacked my bits?"

"Shh!" she hushed him, horrified, her eyes darting frantically about the room to check that no one had overheard him. "If someone finds out what we've been getting up to we could get into a lot of trouble!" she scolded him in a heated whisper. "And if that happens, I might as well forget about making Head Girl next year!"

"You're quite the contradiction, aren't you, woman?" he teased with a good-natured chuckle. "So worried about maintaining your goody-two-shoes image, but you and I both know how naughty you really are..."

"It's good to know that you're so concerned about the things that are important to me, Ronald," she said with a huff, crossing her arms, and she knew that he would rightly take her rare use of his

proper name to mean that she was serious.

"Aw, c'mon, 'Ermione, I'm only taking the piss, don't be that way..."

"I'm not being any way. I'm merely being *me*. If that's not to your liking, then perhaps—"

"What's wrong? Really?" All traces of humor had evaporated from his voice and features as he turned to face her more fully. "Talk to me, love. I know something's been bothering you."

She bit her lip, her insides quivering just a little, as they always did, at the term of endearment from his lips. She still wasn't quite accustomed to the sudden shift in the nature of their relationship—yet Ron seemed to have taken to it as naturally as breathing. Hermione experienced a sudden surge of acute affection for him, accompanied by a spike of guilt that she hadn't exactly been honest about everything she was going through, had she?

She'd just opened her mouth to remedy that to an extent, to describe to him the unexplainable feeling of dread that had overcome her when the portrait hole unexpectedly opened and Harry climbed through.

Ron and Hermione were on their feet at once.

"What does he want?" she asked as he approached, noting the hard, determined expression on his face. "Harry, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said shortly, pushing past them and disappearing up the stairs.

Ron and Hermione exchanged a concerned look, and she was on the verge of suggesting that Ron go check on Harry when suddenly he was racing back down the stairs, panting as he stopped in front of them; Hermione noted that he now had the Marauder's Map and what looked to be a pair of socks clutched in his hands.

"I've got to be quick," Harry began. "Dumbledore thinks I'm getting my Invisibility Cloak. Listen..." He explained in a rush about meeting Professor Trelawney outside the Room of Requirement, the whoop of joy that she'd claimed to have heard from within the room, what she had relayed about Snape listening outside the door the night Trelawney had made the prophecy about Harry, and, finally, what Dumbledore had said about Voldemort's Horcruxes likely being artifacts of historical significance, and of the fact that he, Harry, was about to accompany Dumbledore on a mission to retrieve one of said Horcruxes.

"...so you see what this means?" Harry finished. "Dumbledore won't be here tonight, so Malfoy's going to have another clear shot at whatever he's up to. *No, listen to me!*" he hissed, earning curious glances from those in the nearby vicinity as Hermione opened her mouth to protest the likelihood of Malfoy being "up to" anything. "I know it was Malfoy celebrating in the Room of Requirement. Here—" Hermione glanced down as Harry shoved the Marauder's Map into her hands. "You've got to watch him, and you've got to watch Snape, too. Use anyone else who you can rustle up from the D.A., Hermione, those contact Galleons will still work, right? Dumbledore says he's put extra protection in the school, but if Snape's involved, he'll know what Dumbledore's protection is, and how to avoid it—but he won't be expecting you lot to be on the watch, will he?"

Hermione stared at Harry, struggling to process everything that he was telling them. "Harry—"

"I haven't got time to argue," he cut in quickly. "Take this as well—"

He thrust the socks into Ron's hands.

"Thanks," Ron said, frowning down at them. "Er—why do I need socks?"

"You need what's wrapped in them, it's the Felix Felicis. Share it between yourselves and Ginny, too. Say goodbye to her for me. I'd better go, Dumbledore's waiting—"

"No!" Hermione protested, finding her voice as Ron unwrapped the tiny bottle. "We don't want it, you take it, who knows what you're going to be facing?"

"I'll be fine, I'll be with Dumbledore," Harry hastened to assure her. "I want to know you lot are okay... Don't look like that, Hermione, I'll see you later..."

Ron and Hermione stood in stunned silence for several heartbeats after Harry had gone as quickly as he'd come.

"Blimey," Ron finally said, breaking the silence. "You reckon he's right about Malfoy?"

"I have no idea," Hermione admitted, awakening a bit from the shock of everything she'd learned in a matter of moments as she watched Ron examining the bottle of golden liquid. "But what I do know is that I can't take that. The side effects in a pregnant woman can be dangerous. You and Ginny can share it—and Luna and Neville, if there's enough. I'll go and wake Ginny, and get my Galleon—"

"Wait," Ron said suddenly, his hand closing on her upper arm and halting her mid-turn. "If you're not taking this, then hell if I am."

"Don't be absurd," she protested, pulling her arm from his grasp. "Of course you're taking it, and I won't hear another word of protest."

His blue eyes were wide and determined in his face as he stared down at her, and as his lips parted to protest once more, Hermione flung herself at him on impulse, kissing him hard and passionately on the mouth and ignoring the mutterings of those still in the common room.

"I love you," she said firmly as she released him and stepped back. "Rouse the members of the D.A. in the boys' dormitories and meet me back here in five."

Chapter 31: Must Come to an end

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Waiting Place

Chapter Thirty-One: Must Come to an End

oOo

This chapter begins in HBP Chapter Twenty-Five: The Seer Overheard, and continues through Chapter Twenty-Six: The Cave.

oOo

"Is this it, then?" Ron said in a loud whisper, glancing about at the meager group assembled behind the very tapestry that he and Hermione had "celebrated" behind after finding out that they were having a boy and a girl; the group in question consisted of himself, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, and Neville, the latter three peering expectantly at the former two.

Hermione, studying the Marauder's Map by the light of her wand, glanced up distractedly. "I suppose Luna and Neville are the only D.A. members still keeping an eye on their coins."

"A shame, really," Luna commented while absently twirling a lock of dishwater blonde hair. "I warned some of the others that they might be needed at some point..."

"Right, then," Hermione said, lightly tapping a spot on the map and meeting Ron's gaze. "Malfoy must be in the Room of Requirement again; I can't locate him on the map."

"Really hope Harry's wrong about that sod being up to no good," Ron grumbled as he absentmindedly rubbed the back of his neck.

"If Harry says something isn't right," Ginny piped up, "then that's good enough for me."

"I'm with Ginny on that one," Neville agreed. "If Harry says Malfoy's up to something, I reckon I believe 'im."

"Well, he'd be touched knowing you two've got hard-ons for 'im, anyway," Ron said with a nervous chuckle, attempting to alleviate some of the tension.

"Ron, you're disgusting," his sister groaned, shaking her sheet of long, ginger hair behind her shoulders. "How Hermione can stand—"

"That's enough!" Hermione hissed at the bickering siblings. "Ron—you, Ginny, and Neville should go keep an eye on the Room of Requirement. Luna and I—"

"Bollocks," Ron cut in vehemently. "You're not leaving my side—"

"Ron, I'm perfectly capable—"

"You, me, and Luna can keep an eye on Malfoy. Ginny and Neville can watch for Snape."

Ron met Hermione's gaze imploringly, silently pleading with her not to argue, and, seeming to sense his anxiety, she nodded her acquiescence. "Fine. If that would make you feel better."

"It would. One other thing," he added, holding up the small, gleaming bottle of Felix Felicis and addressing the others. "This is Harry's liquid luck. He wanted us to have it, and I reckon there's enough for everyone to have a sip. Right. Cheers." Ron obediently took a tiny sip—it barely touched his tongue—at Hermione's raised eyebrow that clearly stated, "Do it or else, Ronald Weasley," before passing the bottle to Ginny, who passed it to Luna, who passed it to Neville.

Minutes later, Ron, Hermione, and Luna were creeping down the seventh floor corridor, wands held aloft and on alert for Peeves, Filch, or else anyone who might be lurking about in the passageways this late in the evening.

"Well, here it is," Ron said unnecessarily as the three of them stopped in front of the smooth expanse of stone wall that they knew to conceal the entrance to the Room of Requirement. "So... what now?" Reaching up, he touched the cool stone, unable to resist hoping that if he formulated his request right in his head that it might open and reveal to them what Malfoy was getting up to inside.

"We wait, of course." Moving to stand next to him, Luna studied the wall much as he was, her hands planted firmly on her slender hips.

Ron cleared his throat while slowly allowing his hand to drop to his side. "Right. I don't reckon it's gonna open for us, is it?"

"Doesn't seem likely, no," Hermione agreed.

"What do you suppose he's doing in there?" Luna asked curiously.

"Search me."

Hermione leaned against the wall, wrapping her arms firmly around her middle. "Well, if we're lucky he's simply been sneaking a girl...or girls...in there."

"Yeah, that's what I figured, too," Ron said. "Although, I don't know what sorta bird would voluntarily do *that* with *him*..." He shuddered at the frightful image in his head that gave him the strongest urge to Obliviate himself. "Stupid git."

"Many girls in his House find him attractive," Luna pointed out matter-of-factly.

"Maybe." Ron frowned in distaste at the idea. "But the bloke's about as charming as a troll—and doesn't smell as good; not to mention Daddy's a Death Eater."

"I suppose that's part of the appeal for some. The Death Eater part, not the troll part," she added with a small smile. "I don't personally understand it myself, since You-Know-Who is quite evil, but some people are a bit...strange..."

Ron stifled a laugh at the irony of Loony Lovegood referring to anyone as "strange," but only just.

"But," Luna added after a moment, "as Daddy always says, strange is as strange does..."

A silence descended on the small group as they waited, in which Ron edged closer to Hermione; one of his hands slid behind her back, his other keeping a firm grip on the comfortably familiar, smooth wood of his wand: He felt the strongest urge to protect her and suddenly wished that he'd insisted that she'd stayed behind in the common room—although he knew that she never would've agreed to that. The witch was as stubborn as a Hippogriff, bless her.

"Hey, you all right?" he breathed into her ear after several long minutes had passed, wanting to

keep the conversation private. "You were gonna say something before Harry...you know... busted in..."

He watched her closely in the wandlight as she licked her lips, her eyes darting nervously up and down the darkened, deserted corridor. "It's nothing, really. I've just been feeling...I don't know... out of sorts, I suppose. I just have a bad feeling, is all."

He frowned down at her, his anxiety increasing tenfold at her words. "About what?"

She turned to look up at him then, her chocolate eyes steadily meeting his own gaze. "About everything," she finally said. "Well, everything except *this*," she amended, snuggling into his shoulder. "We feel right, but everything else just seems...surreal...like...like we're not on the right path, and our bubble's about to burst. So to speak. I-I can't explain it exactly."

Ron shook his head, struggling to understand. "Does—does this have anything to do with your nightmares?"

"Partly—they feel so real—but it's more than that. It just feels like..." She hesitated, and he watched her struggle to find the words to explain it to him in a way that he would understand. "Something's out of place. Like I said, I can't properly explain it; what I'm feeling simply isn't logical."

"Sometimes logic has no bearing on the truth," Luna commented from where she leaned against the opposite wall. "Trust your instincts, Hermione."

So much for having a private conversation, Ron thought, annoyed despite their friend's good intentions. The last thing he wanted was for Hermione to feel on edge—it wasn't good for her or the babies—and Luna giving credence to some barmy emotions no doubt brought on by pregnancy hormones wasn't helping matters.

"Listen to me," Ron whispered, turning to face Hermione and gripping her shoulders that felt delicate beneath his ridiculously large hands. "Everything's gonna be all right," he said firmly. "You'll see. Trust me." He grinned then, tucking her hair behind her ears and trying to elicit a smile from her. "And if you don't trust me, trust Felix."

A fleeting grin flickered across her face, but it was gone as quickly as it had come. "I do trust you, Ron, but—"

At that moment, they were interrupted by the rather abrupt reappearance of the door to the Room of Requirement; as Ron stepped in front of Hermione, wand raised protectively, an all-too-familiar blond head poked out and caught sight of the waiting trio, his eyes widening in surprise; just as Ron took note of the Hand of Glory clutched under Draco Malfoy's arm, the ferret tossed some kind of powdery substance into the air.

"*Stupefy!*" Ron shouted an instant too late, as he was suddenly blinded, and he knew immediately that Malfoy had used Fred and George's Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder.

There was a jumble of voices and a shuffling of feet as Ron lunged blindly at the spot that he believed Malfoy to be—he was too fearful of hitting Hermione or Luna to fire off another spell—but his arms closed around nothing but thin air just before he experienced a sharp crack of pain that exploded in his temple.

"Stupid blood traitor," came Malfoy's condescending voice from somewhere off to his right as Ron touched the side of his head, his fingers coming into contact with warm wetness; he was acutely aware of the telltale sounds of a struggle, accompanied by shouting and jeering laughter,

as he lunged once more in Malfoy's general direction—but this time he was stopped by a painful blow to the stomach that knocked him hard on his arse.

"Malfoy," Ron spat in anger as he rolled and staggered to his feet once more, his arms outstretched for balance, "you'd better be glad I can't see shite, 'cause I'm gonna kick your skinny arse when I find you."

"Such bravado, Weasley. Save it for your pregnant little Mudblood girlfriend, won't you?"

"So *this* is the Mudblood that's pregnant, is it, Draco?" a dreadfully familiar female voice asked, the question punctuated by a mad cackle that made Ron's blood run cold.

Bellatrix Lestrange. In the castle. How the fuck had Malfoy done it?

"Stay away from her, or I'll fucking kill you," Ron barked, shaking in rage and undeniable fear as he aimed his wand at the spot where he thought her hideous cackles originated, still hesitant to cast a spell: Where in the hell were Hermione and Luna, anyway?

"Ron," Hermione's voice whispered in unmistakable warning, answering his silent question, and then he felt her small, warm hand close on his bicep.

Lestrange laughed again as if she found Ron's threat the height of hilarity; this was followed by a rustle of clothing, and her voice was suddenly very near his ear, her foul breath in his nostrils: "How very touching; more than a plaything to you, is she? You Weasleys really are despicable, aren't you? Well, I welcome you to try and save your little Mudblood if you can."

Just as he was about to slug her in the face—he didn't reckon the rule about not hitting girls applied to evil hags—he was startled by Hermione's yelp of surprise when her grip was abruptly wrenched from his arm.

"I think we'll have a bit of fun with this one," the hag taunted as Ron stumbled after them, tripping over his own feet in the process. "You'll be good, won't you, dearie? Wouldn't want to have to give you over to the werewolf; he takes a particular pleasure in the young girls...even disgusting Mudbloods such as yourself."

"HERMIONE!" Ron bellowed, feeling ill. He seriously thought he might vomit as he groped about frantically, plowing through the darkness in the direction he thought she'd been taken.

"Ron!"

Her voice, frightened and desperate, sounded distressingly far off as he ran right-smack into another person—he was so distracted that it took him several moments to realize that it was Luna, whom he'd all but forgotten about—and they tumbled to the floor together in a mass of limbs. With some difficulty he managed to disentangle himself from Luna and leap to his feet, pulling her with him as he broke into an all-out run while keeping his other hand wrapped firmly around his wand, uncaring that he might trip or run face-first into the wall—

Abruptly and rather shockingly, they barreled out of range of the Darkness Powder, and Ron's vision came crashing back like someone had flipped on a Muggle light switch: The lighting from the intermittent torches along the walls seemed somehow harsher than usual, hurting his eyes and causing him to blink rapidly as he went skidding to a halt, forcing Luna to stop next to him.

They were standing in the middle of an intersection.

"HERMIONE!"

"There!" Luna said, catching sight of them first: He followed Luna's line of vision and saw Lestrange roughly dragging an unarmed Hermione by her hair, who was clearly struggling against her captor, down the right-hand passageway. And they weren't alone.

Ron's heart practically stopped with the force of his dread as he recognized the unmistakable Fenrir Greyback from the wanted posters: He was the infamous bastard werewolf renowned for biting kids and viciously raping young girls—right before eating them. Just the sort of monster that Voldemort would recruit to do his dirty work and to spread fear into the hearts of the masses.

And currently said monster was jogging alongside Lestrange and Hermione, sneering and leering at the latter as they went like she was a rather tasty-looking treat.

Ron wasn't thinking as he broke into a sprint, fueled by pure adrenaline and desperation; he vaguely took note of the fact that Malfoy and whatever other Death Eaters were with their little party had disappeared, undoubtedly having sprinted ahead or down a different corridor; additionally, he dimly wondered how in the bloody fucking hell the ferret had gotten the Death Eaters into the castle to begin with—but these were all secondary, minor concerns.

All that mattered was getting to Hermione.

Get to Hermione. Save Hermione. Save our unborn children.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he shouted when he was close enough to get a clear aim at Lestrange without risking hitting Hermione, but the hag repelled his spell almost lazily with the flick of a wrist, breaking out into another peal of insane, infuriating laughter. Only at that instant did Ron realize that she'd allowed him to catch up with them—and that she holding a deadly-looking little dagger tightly against Hermione's throat.

"Let 'er go," he said lowly, breathing heavily and trying to force himself to get a grip for Hermione's sake.

"And why should I, little blood traitor boy?" Lestrange asked, clearly amused. "What do I get in return?"

"Me," Ron answered, slowly raising his hands and allowing his wand to clatter to the floor in a moment of extreme desperation. He was barely cognizant of Luna's presence behind him and to his left as he avoided looking at Hermione; instead, he focused squarely on the evil witch that had helped torture Neville's parents to insanity and had murdered Sirius, her own cousin. "You can have me. My blood's worth more than that a simple M-Mudblood." It took everything he had to force himself to say the word that he despised so much, particularly in reference to the woman he loved.

"Ron, no—"

"Don't argue, Hermione. It has to be this way. Luna, get the fuck outta here."

Luna didn't budge from where she stood motionless at the edge of his vision, her wand still held high, and he felt doubly aggravated as he tried to convey a silent message: *Go! Get help!*

"Do you know what I despise more than a knocked-up little Mudblood tart?" Lestrange asked almost conversationally, yet the quiet venom in her voice was unmistakable. "A pureblood wizard that would actually perform the disgusting act of lying with said Mudblood tart, that's what. *Crucio!*"

Ron tried desperately to stop the screams from erupting from his lips as wave after wave of unendurable, excruciating agony tore through his limbs and muscles; he didn't even remember

curling up in a ball on the floor, or vomiting, for that matter, as evidenced by the puddle of sick near his head.

"*Stop it!*" Hermione was screaming, and he could hear the frantic tears in her voice. "*Leave him alone!*"

"You bitch," Ron groaned when there was a lull in the onslaught. "You stupid fucking cunt—AHHH!" He was cut off by another round of vicious, unrelenting attacks; he took comfort, at least, in knowing that as long as Lestrage was picking on him, she wasn't hurting Hermione.

Abruptly, the torment tearing through Ron's limbs ceased once more, leaving him gasping on the cold, stone floor; he ignored the painful aftershocks in the form of muscle spasms as his blurry eyes slowly focused on the scene before him: The bitch still held Hermione helplessly captive, the blade of that dagger pressed against her throat so hard that Ron could make out a distinctive trickle of blood against her creamy flesh, even in the dim lighting.

"I want 'er," Greyback was pleading of Lestrage, a greedy expression on his dirty, matted face. "Give me the girl now."

"Like hell," Ron growled, beyond enraged as he cast his eyes about, searching for something—anything—and then he saw it: his wand, where it had rolled against the wall very near to where he currently lie sprawled on the floor.

Rolling over and scrambling for it, he snatched it up and aimed it at Lestrage's face over Hermione's shoulder, again fueled by desperation and fear for Hermione. "Let 'er go. *Now*. I swear to Merlin I'll blast your ugly, deranged head right off your scrawny little neck."

"Such insults," Lestrage replied with a twisted smirk. "This has been an amusing diversion, but I find that I'm growing weary of this game—and besides, I have places to be. Have it your way, blood traitor." Quite unexpectedly, the sadistic woman released Hermione, who stumbled forward, clearly surprised at being freed so suddenly.

He experienced a flood of relief as he reached for her; but then the hag smiled cruelly in the next instant, abruptly reaching around Hermione from behind—and Ron witnessed the horrible expression of terror, pain, and shock that registered on Hermione's face, and the glint of the blade as it was driven directly into her abdomen.

Chapter End Notes

So...yeah...ouch. Please don't grab your pitchforks & torches. Pretty please? I love you? ;) I considered waiting to post this chapter until I'd completed the next so I could post them back-to-back. Actually, I'd considered writing the remainder of this story & then posting all at once, but I decided to just go ahead & post since I have the opportunity. Just so you know, I've already begun working on the next chapter, but I can't make any promises as to when I'll update since life's been hectic.

On a more cheerful note, the following is a round-up of the awards I received in the Romione Awards thanks to all of you fuckawesome readers:

The Smuttastic Award

- Permission Slip (co-authored by JesWithOneEss/jesrod82)

Best AU

- The Waiting Place

Best Romance

- Hallowed Hearts

Best Ron

- The Waiting Place

Best Hermione

- The Waiting Place

3rd Place Best Hermione

- Hallowed Hearts (Tied for 3rd with JesWithOneEss/jesrod82's "Look at Me.")

I would like to take a moment to thank those readers who thought enough of my fics to submit them for nomination in the first place & for all of the subsequent votes - especially in light of the whole ordeal at FFn, what with my being forced to edit or remove my fics. I'm truly flattered & a bit awestruck, as there were MANY deserving stories & authors on that nominations list; I'm friendly with several of them & know them to be fantastic, friendly, & talented people.

Also, a hearty THANK YOU to the hosts of the awards, for seeking to give recognition to authors who take time out of their busy lives to entertain readers for absolutely free.

Lastly, congrats to the other winners: JesWithOneEss/jesrod82 - Winner of Best Angst ("Anxious"), Best Oneshot ("I Want You"), The Smuttastic Award ("Permission Slip"), & Best Comedy ("And I Swear"); TMBlue - Winner of Best Mystery ("Thieves") & Best Missing Moments ("Sharing Sleep"); MsBinns - Winner of Best Post-War Canon ("Australia"); & Pinky Brown - Winner of Most Heartbreaking Abandoned Fic ("Biscuits: A Love Story"). I'm reading/have read all of the previously named stories except for two of them & can personally vouch for their quality & over-all entertainment factor, so I hope you'll give them a chance if you're not already reading them. ;)

Congrats to all the 2nd & 3rd Place winners as well! I'd buy all you ladies (any gentlemen?) a round of drinks if I could! *hugs*

-Kari

Chapter 32: Lament

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Waiting Place

Chapter Thirty-Two: Lament

oOo

This chapter is set within HBP Chapter Thirty: The White Tomb.

oOo

"You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.

Some windows are lighted. But mostly they're darked..."

—Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*

oOo

The first thing she became aware of as consciousness slowly crept up on her was an incessant, throbbing pain than began in her midsection and spread outward through her tender muscles, leaving her to wonder in a dazed, dreamlike sort of way what had happened to her. Yet the concentration required to hang on to any coherent thought process proved far too daunting for her sluggish, exhausted mind.

The facts that she subsequently became aware of was that, one, she was lying on a semi-soft surface; two, she was warm—far too warm, if truth be told; and three, there were people whispering in the nearby vicinity, yet she couldn't ascertain what the voices were saying. Again, the concentration required to distinguish and interpret the individual sounds was beyond taxing.

Once Hermione gradually became aware of the heavy warmth of a large, broomstick-roughened hand covering hers, she forced her eyes open—and was met by the comfortingly familiar cerulean of Ron's eyes.

She tried to smile at him, but the pain in her abdomen was staggering, and only when she noticed the redness of his eyes and the swollen blotchiness of his face—telling indicators that he'd been crying, something she'd known him to do on exactly one other occasion—did it all come back to her in a deluge of disjointed images and emotions: Malfoy throwing the Darkness Powder outside the Room of Requirement and the confused pandemonium that followed; the helplessness and terror she'd experienced as the Lestrangle woman had dragged her down the corridor, taunting her, while Greyback had panted along next to them like a rabid dog; the horror she'd experienced at witnessing Ron's torture, powerless to stop it out of fear for the lives she carried—

Hermione's mouth opened in a silent scream as a fresh surge of horror and realization caused her to shoot bolt-upright in bed, her hands flying to her belly while crippling agony tore through her stomach anew, but the pain was inconsequential—

"Hermione—!" Ron was now grasping her to himself almost frantically, making shushing sounds while both of his large hands stroked her hair. "It's okay, love, take it easy—"

"The babies," she gasped, horrified, attempting to shove him off of her as she remembered the sickening feeling of that dagger slicing through her flesh—and only when Ron gripped her face in both his hands, forcing her to meet his gaze, did she get a proper look at him: He was shaking his head, his features screwed up in an agony of his own, and when Hermione realized that he was attempting to hold it together for her sake, she knew without a doubt the awful truth.

"No," she gasped, shaking her head and silently pleading with him to tell her it wasn't true, but no denial was forthcoming.

Ron simply continued to shake his head, his expression haunted. "'Ermione, I'm so sorry, I tried—I tried to stop her... I'm so, so sorry.'" His voice broke, and he cleared his throat, reaching for her once more, but Hermione merely ripped open the dressing gown she'd been hastily wrapped in, staring disbelievingly at the thick, angry red scar that extended in a jagged line from one side of her belly to the other, marring her otherwise smooth flesh.

It was hideous.

It was also clear that Madam Pomfrey had done her best, but the dagger that Lestrage had used must have been tainted by Dark Magic.

And the twins, the young lives that she and Ron had created together, were gone. She knew it to her very core, even if she wasn't prepared to accept the reality. "No," she said again, not attempting to disguise the broken sob in her voice, even as she became vaguely aware of others in the hospital: Madam Pomfrey was hovering nearby, and so were Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Professor McGonagall. "I—I never even felt them move. Ron—we—we didn't n-name them..."

Mrs. Weasley let out an audible sob of her own at Hermione's words, but the younger witch was too lost in her own head to take notice: How could this be happening? *Why* had this happened to them?

She simply couldn't fathom the senselessness of it all...

And then she was sobbing into Ron's chest unabashedly, and as his face pressed into her hair she felt his own wet tears, hot against her scalp. The little boy and girl that she'd dreamed about were gone, their lives snuffed out before they'd even really begun.

It was so unfair. She hadn't asked to become impregnated at the age of seventeen, yet she'd made the most of it and had even begun fantasizing about what her unborn children would be like; she'd actually been looking *forward* to motherhood, and now, just like that, on the whim of a madwoman, they were gone forever. It was just so bloody *unfair*.

And yet she'd known. In her heart, she'd known that she wasn't meant for motherhood—at least not yet. The nightmares had been premonitions of sorts, warnings that it wasn't meant to be. *Then what was the purpose of it all?* she asked herself.

Perhaps there was no purpose, she concluded. Perhaps events simply happened at random, with no apparent rhyme or reason.

Yet she didn't believe that. Not really.

"What happened?" she finally asked when she'd pulled herself together enough to speak, her voice thick with tears. Pulling away from Ron slightly, she noticed that the others were now gathered around a hospital bed at the far end of the long room, clearly having desired to give Ron and Hermione privacy in which to grieve. "Who is that?" she asked, nodding at the one other occupied bed in the room, the one his parents currently hovered around, as dread gripped her heart

in a terrible vice...

"Bill," Ron answered, his face darkening as he pressed a damp cloth to her face, dabbing tenderly as he clearly attempted to compose himself before explaining further: "That bastard Greyback got to 'im, but don't worry, he'll be all right. Neville and Flitwick were hurt, too, but they were released this morning—but never mind about that. Are you in any pain? Should I—Should I get Madam Pom—?"

"I'm fine," she lied quickly, feeling like she deserved the severe discomfort she was in. After all, it was her fault their babies were gone. If only she'd taken Harry seriously, then she wouldn't have let Malfoy surprise them like that. "What happened?" she repeated, needing to know what had transpired while she'd been unconscious. Daylight filled the room, and it could be the next day or the next week for all she knew. "Is anyone... Did anyone...?"

She knew from the expression on Ron's face that something terrible had happened—something beyond the horror of losing the twins.

"Who?" she breathed, almost too scared to know.

"Snape killed Dumbledore," Ron finally said, his tone bitter as his eyes met hers, and Hermione didn't bother attempting to stifle her gasp of shock at this unexpected and horrendous revelation. "Harry was right all along. Malfoy took his father's place as a sodding Death Eater, and the bastard let 'em into the castle through a Vanishing Cabinet... *That's* what the ferret's been doing in the Room of Requirement—repairing the bloody Cabinet that Montague got lost in last year—it has a twin in—"

"Borgin and Burke's," Hermione said weakly, feeling exhausted. "Of course."

In a mechanical sort of way, Ron explained that after Lestrange had stabbed Hermione, Lupin and Tonks and some other members of the Order of the Phoenix had shown up, guided by Luna, and a fight had ensued as Ron and Luna had taken Hermione to the hospital. Meanwhile, Harry and Dumbledore had landed on the Astronomy Tower, the latter seriously incapacitated, where they'd been met by Malfoy and, shortly thereafter, by Severus Snape and a couple of other Death Eaters.

"Harry says that Malfoy was lowering his wand, and it was Snape that actually did the deed," Ron concluded his monologue. "Still, I blame that fucking ferret for what happened to you and...and the babies," he added bitterly, "and if I ever get my hands on 'im I'm gonna fucking kill 'im. Him *and* that miserable cunt."

Hermione bit her lip, suppressing another onslaught of tears as she took in everything he'd told her. "They got away, I take it," she finally said, softly.

"Yeah. They got away. And to top it off, the Horcrux was a fake."

At Hermione's questioning, Ron explained what Harry had relayed about what had happened in the cave. When he'd finished, he seemed somehow older than his seventeen years. "It was all for nothing," he added in that same bitter tone. "Dumbledore left the castle for nothing. He weakened himself for nothing. If he hadn't left in the first place, Malfoy might not've had the nerve to act..."

And our babies would still be alive, Hermione silently completed the thought for him.

"...and Dumbledore would still be alive, and Bill wouldn't've been fucked up by that werewolf," he said instead.

At that instant, Madam Pomfrey wandered back over and firmly but gently informed Ron that Hermione needed her rest before offering the young witch something to help her sleep; she

refused, and as Madam Pomfrey argued with her, Mrs. Weasley pushed her way between her son and the school's Healer, seeming unable contain herself any longer, and engulfed Hermione in her motherly arms.

"You poor dear," Mrs. Weasley breathed, and the two women dissolved into tears together.

oOo

Ron felt about a hundred years old as he stepped into the corridor to find Harry and Fleur stubbornly waiting, the former looking as terrible as Ron felt.

"Ow are zey?" Fleur asked him immediately.

"Bill's about the same; Hermione's awake."

"How is she?" Harry breathed, taking off his glasses briefly and pinching the bridge of his nose as if trying to repress a headache.

"About as good as can be expected. Given everything."

"Ron, I'm—I'm so sorry," Harry finally said in a rush, clearly at a loss as to what to say or do. Ron had barricaded himself in the infirmary with Hermione since he'd brought her there two nights ago, refusing to leave her side, and as such the two friends had only spoken briefly, as Madam Pomfrey had been very strict about unnecessary visitors crowding the hospital.

Ron merely shrugged. "She's insisting on going to the funeral." There was no need to specify whose, as there had only been one death on their side. *Not counting our babies*, he added darkly to himself.

"That sounds like our Hermione," Harry offered with a weak smile as Fleur slipped around them and into the hospital.

"Yeah. Stubborn to the end, that one," he said with a halfhearted attempt at a laugh, and Harry agreed. "Oh yeah—at least we know now for sure that Hermione's accident with the potion was just a coincidence. McGonagall still won't tell me who smuggled it into the school, something about protecting student confidentiality or some rubbish, but it wasn't Malfoy. Just your run-o-the-mill Muggle-born-hating pureblood sod playing with Daddy's Dark Artifacts. The father's been arrested, though, and McGonagall reckons he'll do a short stint in Azkaban."

"Oh. Well. That's good, right?"

"Yeah." Ron didn't think it mattered anymore one way or another, really, especially since his Death Eater mates would probably just break him and Malfoy Senior out soon anyway, but he didn't have the energy or the inclination to point that out to Harry.

"Ron—"

"She's asking for you," he interrupted quickly. He couldn't bear talking about the twins, or having to listen to another "I'm sorry." He'd accepted that he wasn't going to be a father anymore, but he couldn't stomach the pity.

Their eyes met for several meaningful heartbeats before Harry cleared his throat. "Right. I'll just go and—er—"

"It's my fucking fault, Harry," Ron miserably confessed the truth that had been in the back of his mind all along, just as his best mate moved to push open the door and follow Fleur inside.

His hand that had been reaching for the door dropped to his side, and Harry turned slowly to face his friend once more. "Ron," he said with a fair amount of incredulity. "That's ridiculous. How could it—?"

"I—I should've insisted she go into hiding. I wanted her to, but I let 'er convince me that it'd be okay. Now she's in there thinking it's all her fault, when I'm the bloke. They're my responsibility. I should've—I should've—"

"Put your foot down?" Harry said ironically, steering him further away from the door by his elbow. "I'm sure she appreciates the chivalry, but this isn't the Middle Ages, and Hermione's a big girl, Ron. You can't take responsibility for her decisions—not that it was her fault, either," he added quickly in apparent response to the fact that Ron was about to jump to Hermione's defense. "It wasn't anyone's fault but Bellatrix Lestrange," Harry said firmly. "*She* did this. And Draco Malfoy. He might not be a killer, but—"

"He murdered my babies," Ron interjected in a whisper, the emotion in his voice palpable even to his own ears. "You're right. It's his fault. He let that monster into the castle with my pregnant fiancée, knowing full bloody well what she is—a sick, sadistic Muggle-born-hater—and what she's capable of..."

Harry was silent once more, again clearly not knowing what he should say or do. "Ron, I'm—"

"Don't say you're sorry again," Ron cut in, feeling tormented. "Please. I can't stand the pity, Harry. Not from you."

His best mate merely nodded, seeming to understand. "All right. I won't."

"I'll say this," Ron said after another moment of silence had passed between the two friends, "if I lay eyes on either of them again, I won't hesitate to aim to kill."

oOo

Although she had regained her strength over the next two days and could walk quite well on her own despite the lingering tenderness in her abdomen, Ron and Harry both insisted on supporting her across the Hogwarts grounds and to the edge of the Black Lake, where Professor Dumbledore's funeral was to be held.

As she sat between the two boys, her best friends in the world, with Ginny on the other side of Harry, Hermione felt nothing but emptiness when the little tufty-haired wizard, who seemed familiar but whose name escaped her, began to speak of Albus Dumbledore's accomplishments. She was aware that she should feel saddened by the great Headmaster's passing—and she *was* sorry that he was gone, and even more so that he was betrayed by a man he trusted—but all she could seem to manage was a sharp, piercing ache in her heart that her unborn children would never be honored in such a grand manner.

Actually, there wouldn't be a funeral at all.

Mrs. Weasley had gently asked them if they'd like to hold a small memorial service for their children, whom she and Ron had decided to call Caleb and Anna—although what morbid purpose it served in naming their dead babies, she had no idea; admittedly, it even felt a tad silly, since they'd only been at thirteen weeks' gestation—but Hermione had ultimately rejected the idea.

A memorial would make the nightmare all the more real. No, it was better this way. The tiny souls called Caleb and Anna had already drifted away on the early summer breeze, carried home by Fawkes's birdsong. They were long gone.

Goodbye, loves. Wherever you are. I hope you're happy.

Hermione began to cry then, and she didn't push Ron away when he moved to hold her. Whatever else happened, she knew they would be all right; that hadn't changed. He loved her, and she loved him, and they would one day be married. And perhaps in the not-so-distant future, after the threat of Voldemort had passed, they might even get the chance at parenthood again—but it was too painful to linger over such a prospect at the present.

After the service was over, she managed to escape the maddening crowd, and Ron, to think. To her mild surprise, she stumbled upon none other than Lavender Brown, who was standing by herself on the far side of the lake—Hermione recalled briefly that the Patil twins' mother had sent for them the morning after the attack on the school—staring blankly into the water and looking like the picture of perfection: Her hair was perfectly golden blonde in the sunlight, her cheeks were perfectly flushed, her lips were perfectly plump and pink, and her legs were perfectly shaped beneath her shortened hemline.

However, Hermione was well aware that the other girl's outward perfection masked deep-rooted insecurities that outweighed her own by far.

"Lovely day, isn't it?" Hermione said by way of greeting, not bothering to feel guilty. She'd decided that she was done with the guilt; in light of everything else, a broken teenage heart seemed trite and easily repaired.

Lavender's gray-blue eyes widened perceptibly as she looked up, clearly surprised. "Oh, hello."

Moving to stand next to her dorm mate and Ron's ex-girlfriend, Hermione peered curiously into the water. "What were you looking at just now?"

"Oh, nothing really," Lavender responded, throwing her a suspicious glance and seeming somewhat nervous. "I come here to think sometimes, and given everything that's happened..." As her voice trailed off, she seemed to be engaged in some sort of internal battle. "Look, Hermione," she finally said, clearly coming to a decision, "I'm really sorry about—about what happened to you. Really. I know that things have been...tense between us this year, but I've always considered you a friend of sorts. And I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Especially a friend."

Hermione smiled lightly, recalling how Lavender had offered to do her make-up for the Yule Ball in fourth year, and how in third year she'd suggested that Hermione try a breast-enlarging charm to make boys notice her. True, the girl could be obnoxious and superficial, but she usually meant well. "Thank you, Lavender. And I'm sorry for being a 'boyfriend-stealing slag,' as I believe you worded it."

Lavender laughed. "Yes, well, can you blame me for being upset? And I forgive you, by the way, for stealing my boyfriend. Besides, Ron may be cute, but I've decided that he's just...way too immature for me anyway. It's probably for the best that you took him off my hands."

"Probably," she agreed with a small grin, impressed in spite of herself that Lavender would be good-natured enough to crack a joke at her own expense. "Well, have a good summer, then."

"And you as well. I'll see you next year." For a split-second, Lavender looked as if she meant to move to hug Hermione, but then she seemed to think better of it in the next instant, instead turning awkwardly back to the water.

As Hermione walked away from the decidedly strange encounter, she felt...oddly elated, and had come to a few decisions:

1. She would not be returning to Hogwarts next year, even if the school wasn't shut down by the Board of Governors. Harry had to start finding the remainder of Voldemort's Horcruxes, and of course she and Ron would be there every step of the way.
2. She wouldn't tell her parents that she'd lost the babies. It wasn't necessary, seeing as how by the time Hermione finished carrying out the plan that had begun formulating in her head, Hugo and Jean Granger wouldn't even remember that they had a daughter—much less an unborn granddaughter and grandson. This plan wasn't something that Hermione relished the idea of putting into action, but she'd taken a risk with her children by not going into hiding and had paid the ultimate price; she therefore had learned her lesson and wouldn't take any chances with Mum and Dad.
3. She would have sex with Ron again. As soon as possible. She wanted him, and she no longer saw the point in putting off the inevitable. After all, they would only live once—and realistically not for very much longer. And Hermione was nothing if not a realist.

Chapter End Notes

As it stands, I'm planning at least two, maybe three more chapters including an epilogue, so stay tuned. As always, thank you for your continued support of me & my little nearly-completed fic. ;)

Ooh, anyone else excited about this adult-catered novel that JKR just released?? Can't wait to sink my teeth into it! My dream is that she'll one day get the urge to write an adult-catered, Ron/Hermione-based sequel to the HP novels, but I'm not holding my breath for that. ;p

I hope you all have a great weekend!

-Kari

Chapter 33: White Horses & Guaranteed Happily-Ever-After

The Waiting Place

Chapter Thirty-Three: White Horses & Guaranteed Happily-Ever-After

oOo

This chapter is set during the summer before the events of

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

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It was done.

It had taken several weeks and had proven vastly more complicated than she'd originally envisaged: Ideas had had to be planted and allowed to fester, her parents' practice had had to be sold, documents had had to be forged, memories had had to be altered and at times removed altogether, and all traces of Hermione Granger's existence had had to be removed from the house—all of which had taken time, patience, organization, and quite a bit of intricate, difficult magic.

The bedroom that had been her childhood sanctuary in the years before she'd received her Hogwarts invitation was now an ordinary guestroom, with no particularly personal characteristics: Her lilac and cream comforter had been replaced by a teal floral-patterned bedspread of the type that could be found in virtually any hotel room, and all of her personal effects—photographs, books, keepsakes, clothing, and the like—with the exception of what she'd packed in her magically extended handbag to take to the Burrow, had been shrunk and stored in an old trunk in the attic, protected by enchantments.

In a detached sort of way, Hermione admired the work that she'd accomplished the previous week, which had been completed just before the task of erasing herself from her parents' memories altogether and planting the false idea that she was merely a university student called "Maggie" renting a room: There was now an impersonal lamp on her freshly-emptied nightstand, and a Monet print, chosen at random, adorned the wall above the bed in a cheap frame. There was a long-obsolete computer and rotary-dial telephone perched on the desk, and the walls were now almost so white they made her eyes hurt a bit.

Hugo and Jean Granger had never existed, according to official documentation, and therefore neither had Hermione. According to all Muggle records, Wendell and Monica Wilkins had resided in this house, and *they* didn't have a daughter. And currently Wendell and Monica were on a plane to Australia, leaving their house in Britain to the care of their young "tenant," who promised to take good care of their home while they were away, however long that may be, or until the couple decided to sell it.

The only soul in this world who knew what Hermione had done was Ron, and not even he knew the full extent of the measures she'd taken, how complicated the whole process had been—the planning and intricate magic that had been required to pull it off without arousing any suspicion from the Grangers' friends, neighbors, colleagues, and family. (To her immense guilt, she'd been forced to modify the memories of others besides her parents.)

More than the preparations and complicated bits of magic, the most difficult part of all had been lying to and deceiving her mother and father every single day for the past two months: She'd

looked them in the eye and told them that she was fine and that the pregnancy was progressing accordingly. Actually, it had taken quite a bit of acting to prevent herself from bursting into tears in her mother's presence, particularly when she'd insisted on taking Hermione shopping for maternity and baby clothing in London, chattering all the while about the best prams and cribs, nappies and bottles. "That is, if you don't plan on breastfeeding," Mum had prattled on, steering Hermione into yet another trendy boutique, "although I hope you'll consider it, at least, since it's best for the babies—but it's your body, of course, dear, and therefore your decision..."

As Hermione had stood in the changing room, staring into the mirror at the maternity outfit that she would have no need of and trying her hardest not to cry at the senselessness of everything, Mum had looked at her strangely and inquired as to whether she was all right; the younger woman had never been a particularly convincing liar, yet she'd forced herself to smile brightly. "I'll take the lot!" she'd said in the most cheerful tone she could muster before her mother could persist.

Apart from her continued grief over losing her unborn children, the guilt she'd felt for her deception was overwhelming—but it wasn't only about letting her mum and dad continue to believe that they would soon be grandparents: She'd also kept her mouth firmly shut about Dumbledore's murder, the bits of Voldemort's soul that she intended to help Harry locate and destroy, and the fact that she wasn't returning to Hogwarts in the fall.

The less they knew, the less complicated it would make matters.

Before she'd cast the final incantations to replace her parents' identities and to modify their memories, she'd hugged them both tightly and told them that she loved them.

And then she'd done it. There was no going back.

It had been disconcerting, to say the least, living under her parents' roof for an entire week with them believing her to be a stranger: Having her father look at her without an ounce of recognition in his eyes that were so similar to her own and inquiring about her studies was quite disturbing indeed. Could he not remember her at all, even on a completely subconscious level? Could he not see how alike they were in appearance? Could he not *feel* that she was his daughter, his little girl that he'd taken camping as a child and had engaged in multiple debates around the dinner table over the years?

Evidently, the magic Hermione had performed was quite effective. If she hadn't felt so heartbroken and ashamed by her raping of her parents' minds—in spite of the fact that it was for a noble purpose, namely saving their lives, she couldn't deny that what she'd done was tantamount to anything less than a rape—she supposed she might have found a certain pride in the difficulty level of what she'd accomplished at such a young age.

It was entirely necessary that their identities be altered before further practical preparations could be made, but it was equally important that it not be done so far in advance that Hermione might risk an unexpected friend or relative coming to call—even though by that point she'd already spread the word that Mum and Dad were on holiday for the foreseeable future.

Hermione Granger let out a weary sigh in the present, plucking up Crookshanks as he hopped up onto the ugly teal bedspread and nuzzling her face into the warmth of his fur. "I know everything's different now," she murmured as she pulled back and scratched him between his ears. "But things will get better," she added to both the cat and herself. "You'll see."

She swallowed back a sudden gulp of despair, her thoughts turning as they so often had over the summer to the two lives that she'd lost, and to the pain that she'd endured in absolute silence, with Ron as her only real source of consolation—and yet what they could discuss by owl had been sorely limited, even when using code words that they'd decided on during the train ride to King's

Cross at the end of term, given that their correspondence might realistically be intercepted.

She thought about them all the time. Not a day, or even an hour, really, went by without her would-be children invading her thoughts: She wondered what they would have been like, who they might have grown up to be, and what they might have looked like if only that sociopath hadn't intervened and thoughtlessly ended their lives before they'd even begun.

And she'd laughed. The evil, horrid woman had *laughed* as she'd pierced Hermione's flesh and murdered her babies.

Just like that, her sorrow was replaced by a white-hot fury, as it quite frequently did these days, and she desired more than anything to rage. She longed to make Bellatrix Lestrange suffer as she suffered. Hermione didn't think that she'd ever really, truly hated anyone before in her life. But she hated Bellatrix Lestrange. She hated her with every breath that she took, with every ounce of her soul, to her very core...

She knew that Ron blamed Draco Malfoy in equal measure for what had happened, and while Hermione acknowledged that he'd indisputably played a prominent role, all of her own wrath was reserved entirely for Lestrange: Draco Malfoy was ignorant and prejudiced as a direct result of his upbringing, but she recognized that he'd acted out of fear for his own life and that of his family. She didn't believe that he'd truly desired for anyone to get hurt.

Of course, voicing that opinion to Ron in the hours before they'd boarded the Hogwarts Express at the beginning of summer had been a mistake, as he'd become angry and had proceeded to launch into a tirade about her finding excuses for what Malfoy had done. The accusation had stung, as she didn't feel that she was doing anything of the sort, but for once she hadn't lashed out in her own defense because it was obvious that Ron was suffering: The loss of the twins had effected him as profoundly as it had her, but differently.

Eventually, the salty, metallic taste on her tongue drew her attention to the fact that she'd bitten down on her lip hard enough to draw blood, and so she slowly roused herself, standing up and allowing Crookshanks to slide to the floor, where he landed on all fours and glared up at her with clear annoyance in his yellow, lamp-like eyes.

However, Hermione was no longer paying him any mind as she wandered into the bathroom and splashed cold water onto her face. As she finished drying herself off and replaced the hand towel, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror: Her skin was almost translucent in the harsh lighting, her usually wild, unmanageable curls hung in lank curtains over her shoulders, and there were prominent bluish circles beneath her eyes, evidence of her sleepless nights and poor diet.

She looked an absolute fright. It was no wonder that Mum had acted so concerned about her. Well, up until Hermione had modified her memory, at any rate.

On sudden impulse, she slowly raised the hem of her t-shirt to face the scar that marred her belly. Up until now, she had avoided really looking at. Actually, she'd avoided mirrors almost entirely over the summer and had bathed in the dark, but now she forced herself to study how purplish red and thick and ugly it was...

This is where Lestrange pierced my flesh with her dagger. This is where she murdered my babies by savagely stabbing clean through my womb.

Madam Pomfrey had reluctantly informed her during her final examination, before she had been given a clean bill of health to return home, that it was possible that she'd suffered permanent damage and might have difficulty carrying a child to term in the future.

A sob forced its way out of her lips at that thought, and she shoved her shirt down and turned—

To find Ron watching her from the doorway.

"What are you doing?" she asked after giving a startled jump, pushing past him and out into her bedroom. As she rounded on him, she was annoyed that he'd been spying on her and embarrassed that he'd seen...well, *it*. Not that he hadn't seen it in the hospital, but still... "You were supposed to be waiting downstairs."

"You were taking a long time, so I came up to check on you," he explained with a shrug, his hands shoved firmly into the pockets of his faded, too-short jeans. She watched as his eyes flashed to her midsection as if he couldn't help himself; although her scar was now concealed by her shirt, she couldn't help but cross her arms over her belly self-consciously. "Are you all right, Hermione?" he added softly. "I've been worried about you. I wish you'd've come to the Burrow sooner...or let me come here to help you..." It was quite blatant that he was hesitant to mention her parents out of fear that it would send her into a meltdown.

"There were a lot of preparations to be done, and I had to do it on my own. Besides, I'm fine." *Actually, I'm anything but "fine," but complaining about it won't help matters.*

"You don't look fine," he retorted matter-of-factly, approaching her in two long strides, and she found herself unexpectedly in awe of how tall he was—Had he grown in the weeks that they'd been apart?—and his chest was definitively broader beneath his plain gray t-shirt. Her gaze raking his body hungrily, she noted that his eyes seemed more vividly blue than her memory recollected, his shaggy hair was longer and now curling around his ears, and his freckles were so prominent that they almost gave him the appearance of having a tan.

She knew from his letters that he'd been spending a lot of time outdoors, helping his mother with early preparations for Bill and Fleur's wedding (not by his choice), playing Quidditch with his brothers and Ginny, and going for frequent broom rides. She also knew that it helped him keep his mind off of his worries about Harry and the upcoming mission to "rescue" him from the Dursleys...among other things.

Whatever his reasons for staying active outdoors, he looked really good. Quite fit, actually. (She was almost embarrassed when she thought about how negligent she'd been concerning her own physical appearance and her health in general.)

Of course, she'd noticed all of those things about him when he'd arrived two hours before, at his insistence, to help her finish up at the Granger—er, Wilkins residence. (He'd hounded her by owl for the better part of a month about when he could come over to help her finish "remodeling," much to her combined chagrin and adoration.) Yet the details of his physical appearance struck her anew, as if they hadn't seen one another in months and months rather than a handful of weeks.

Despite her dark frame of mind, she couldn't help the stutter of her heart or the hitch in her breathing as he raised a hand and tenderly, affectionately traced her lower lip with the pad of his broom handle-roughened thumb. "You're bleeding." His voice was barely more than a whisper.

She literally trembled at his touch, and at the ill-disguised longing in his voice.

God, she'd missed him. And she hadn't forgotten the promise that she'd made to herself at the end of term. Unfortunately, he'd treated her like a porcelain doll after she lost the babies, hardly daring to touch her out of seeming fear that she might break; even when they reunited two hours previously he'd been notably...restrained as he'd kissed her hello.

But she wasn't a porcelain doll, and she wouldn't break at his touch—and she was determined to

prove it to him.

On sudden impulse, she closed her lips around his thumb and sucked it hard between her lips, relishing in his gasp of surprise and immediate desire; there was a slight sting where she'd bitten her lip minutes prior, but the discomfort somehow only served as a reminder of the fact that she was so very alive, while her children would never have a chance at life at all... Desiring to drive such thoughts from her mind, she boldly swirled her tongue around his thumb and bobbed her head, leaving no question as to what action she was mimicking.

She met his heavy-lidded, lustful gaze while slowly releasing him, experiencing a fair amount of satisfaction as she noted the rapid rise-and-fall of his chest and the conspicuous bulge tenting his jeans. She watched him lick his slightly chapped lips, his eyes concurrently flashing toward her chest, and Hermione was very aware that she hadn't bothered wearing a bra that morning, and as such her nipples would be clearly visible through her thin tee, given that she was already so aroused.

As Ron's gaze dragged slowly upward and their eyes met once more, a desire-laden spark ignited between them, and Hermione didn't hesitate to step forward and press herself against the long, hard length of his body, exalting in the evidence of his own passion, rigid and insistent against her belly. The way she kissed him then, when she craned her neck to meet him, her arms encircling his neck while his wrapped beneath her bum and gathered her more fully against him, was far from innocent—and she knew that if there was one thing that she wasn't any longer, it was "innocent": Events of the previous months had served to effectively abolish her innocence, and she sometimes found it difficult to believe that up until that time the only thing remotely sexual she had ever done with another person had been to share a handful of almost childish snogs with Viktor. (While he'd been older and a Quidditch star, he'd nevertheless been a gentleman and hadn't pushed her for anything her fifteen-year-old self hadn't been prepared to give.)

Before Hermione could even register what had happened, Ron had deepened the kiss, his tongue penetrating and dominating her mouth almost desperately while he backed her against her dresser with a deep groan; when he stepped between her ankles and nudged her legs apart, she experienced a surge of nervous, dizzying excitement that made her stomach swoop and her head spin, especially when he ground his erection unabashedly against her belly in an abandoned, frenzied sort of way. "Er-my-nee," he moaned shakily when their lips finally broke apart; without skipping a beat, he began nipping aggressively along her jaw and throat in a downward trail.

Meanwhile, Hermione's hands hungrily explored the smooth, soft skin beneath his shirt, savoring every inch of him that she hadn't touched in seeming ages... She'd missed this. She'd missed *him*. How much time they'd wasted over the years; they could have had months together before her accident with the potion, years even, if only they both hadn't pretended to be so oblivious... Yet her "accident" was exactly what had been required to force them to get over their mutual stubbornness and admit that they were in love with each other.

And just like that, she realized that it *hadn't* all been for nothing. Caleb and Anna's existences hadn't been some random accident, and their just-as-sudden deaths hadn't been in vain: However tragic and unfortunate, they had brought their parents together, and she would be forever grateful to them for that. Their unborn children, who had existed so briefly but had nevertheless made such a profound impact, would never be forgotten.

Hermione wanted to both sob and laugh at that thought, but instead she grabbed Ron's face with both hands, forcing his lips to meet hers in another impassioned embrace. He seemed a bit startled at first, but he quickly recovered, reciprocating her zeal and matching her enthusiasm while her trembling hands, which had been exploring his lower belly, suddenly dipped lower as she reached for the button of his trousers...

"Her-Hermione, wait..." His voice was shaky as he ripped his lips from hers abruptly, breaking off their kiss while he leaned up so as to meet her eyes; he seemed to be struggling for his brain to take command of his body as his hands stilled her movements on the zip of his jeans.

She was confused for the space of several instances as she blinked up at him, attempting to comprehend why he had stopped her before coming to the only conclusion that made any sense to her lust-fuddled brain: "It—it's okay," she whispered with a reassuring smile. "It's taken care of."

This time, he was the one who blinked in evident confusion. "Wh-what's taken care of?"

She licked her lips, starting to become annoyed that he was ruining the spontaneity of the moment—not to mention the mood. Honestly, must she spell it out? "Birth control, Ron. Madam Pomfrey gave me a once-a-day potion, which I can refill at any Wizarding clinic." When his mouth opened slightly and he merely looked astonished, she couldn't resist rolling her eyes. "Oh, honestly. Do you really think that I wouldn't be prepared for...for *this*?" Her cheeks burned in spite of her attempt at being blasé about sex. *Sex with Ron*. On the inside, she was trembling as erotic images from that hospital room, a virtual lifetime ago, flashed like a Muggle slideshow in her brain.

"No. No, it's not that," he replied a tad defensively. "'Course I bloody know you're prepared for everything, but d'you really think we should...right now...?" His voice trailed off and he looked uncertain, his eyes darting about nervously as he took a half-step back.

He chooses now to suddenly become hesitant about sex? Three months ago he would've fucked me in the middle of the common room in the middle of the day if I had let him. "Can you think of a better time?" she said instead. "It's almost nightfall, all of our work here is done, and your mother's expecting us. And once we get to the Burrow, I can't imagine we'll be afforded any privacy or time."

Once again, she thought of the upcoming mission to safely transport Harry to the Burrow, which would happen in three nights' time, plus all the wedding preparations that Mrs. Weasley would undoubtedly insist that they help out with. Additionally, there would be extensive packing and preparations to be made for the impending Horcrux expedition, which Harry would definitely want to begin as soon as possible.

"It's just...I was thinking...maybe it's not the right time." Ron was still sporting a prominent erection, the fact of which clearly defied his words.

His body plainly wanted sex, so why was he so uncertain *now*? Did he think that she couldn't handle it emotionally? While it was true that prior to losing the twins she'd been hesitant as a result of the forced manner in which she'd lost her virginity, she knew what she wanted, and she no longer harbored any reservations: Losing their children had changed everything for her.

She now recognized how fragile and temporary life was, and denying herself something that she wanted and needed desperately, both on a physical and emotional level, seemed silly, childish: Preserving one's "purity" simply for the sake of purity itself was the fantasy of a naïve little girl who still believed in fairytales and being rescued by princes on white horses and guaranteed happily-ever-afters... Some might call her a cynic, but in her own eyes she was a realist.

The facts were as follows: 1. She might die. Very soon. As might Ron and Harry. (That was the reality of their situation—of the world in general, so she might as well accept it. Happily-ever-afters were *not* guaranteed.) 2. She and Ron loved each other and had vowed to be together for the remainder of their lives, no matter how long or short that timeframe might be. 3. She intended to make the most of the time they had together.

Hermione observed the irony of how now that she no longer had any lingering doubts pertaining

to sex, Ron was behaving as if he was scared she might shatter at any moment. "I'm not a porcelain doll, Ron," she finally uttered, her voice little more than a whisper as she slinked around him and flopped down on the bed, her arms crossed defensively over her chest. "I'm not going to *break*, you know."

"I know you're not—"

"Or maybe that's not it at all," she cut in, aware that she was now being entirely unreasonable, but not caring. His rejection had stung, she had to admit, despite the fact that she herself had rejected his physical advances multiple times; however, when she was on the fast track to anger, her rationale that she relied on so heavily had the tendency to go completely out the window.

"Perhaps you're simply not attracted to me anymore—"

"*WHAT—?*"

"I did fail as a woman and as a mother, after all. I lost our babies. I wouldn't want to have sex with me either if I were you. I imagine I'd find the thought quite appalling."

She knew that Ron must think her barmy, especially in light of the fact that not moments before she would have happily let him shag her atop her dresser, and now she was fuming with a rage that not even she fully understood. Her suspicions were confirmed by the wholly flabbergasted expression on his face as he gaped at her in a manner that suggested that she'd suddenly sprouted a second head from the side of her neck.

"Hermione, listen to me," he finally said, clearly attempting to pick his words carefully. "You know it's not that—you know I don't blame you—"

"Well, then maybe you should."

"You're completely mental, you know that?" When she merely rolled her eyes, he barreled on: "Blimey, Hermione, please listen to me very carefully: It. Was. Not. Your. Fault. You did *not* fail as...as a mother or a woman—and I *do* want you. Fucking hell, isn't that obvious?" He gestured at the bulge in his jeans. "I want you so fucking bad that sometimes I feel like I might bloody *die* if I can't fuck you again."

Hermione experienced an abrupt swell of renewed warmth and longing between her legs at his blatant, crude words, her anger fading as quickly as it had come: She was exhausted, both mentally and physically, and had absolutely no desire to talk or row with him anymore. All she wanted was to feel good again and to make him feel good. "Then what are you waiting for?" she breathed as she stood and faced him once more, her voice quaking with unfettered desire and nerves. "I'm right here, and I'm asking—no, begging—you to fuck me again. Please, Ron." She licked her lips and took a steadying breath, and then she reached out, daringly cupping that hard bulge in his trousers and curling her fingers around the outline of his thick shaft. "I love you. So fuck me. Now. And don't treat me like I'm made of porcelain."

Chapter 34: Body and Spirit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Waiting Place

Chapter Thirty-Four: Body and Spirit

oOo

This chapter is set during the summer before the events of

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

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Ron Weasley couldn't think—he could barely bloody *breathe*—as he pushed her almost roughly back on the mattress, fueled by an ancient, primal, and wholly male instinct: He attacked her lips, penetrating her mouth the way he yearned to penetrate her elsewhere, while at the same time straddling her hips and grinding his raging, throbbing hard-on into her belly.

Mine, a feral voice in his head snarled, and every intuition that he possessed, every fiber that comprised his being, desired nothing more than to claim her as such once more—and this time the act would be one-hundred percent free will on both their parts. There was no potion forcing them to fuck or die. There was just him and her and their irrefutable, mutual passion and attraction—which had eventually lead to love—that had always been there, just beneath the surface of every one of their bickering sessions, every one of their heated glances, every time their skin had accidentally come into contact over the years while walking or sitting together, generating an undeniable spark...

All it would have taken for that spark to ignite and become a full-on blaze was the right set of circumstances—which was exactly what had happened. Fucking hell, that spark was now a veritable inferno, and it threatened to consume him whole. And Ron would gladly let it.

Her voice, the desperate timbre of it, still rang in his ears: *I love you. So fuck me. Now. And don't treat me like I'm made of porcelain.*

So fuck me.

Fuck me.

Fuck.

Me.

He felt like he might explode if he couldn't have her. Right now. "Baby, I'm gonna fuck you raw," he panted as he nipped her throat hard enough to make her yelp: He knew there would be a mark there. "I'm gonna fuck you so good you'll still feel me between your legs next week." When he shifted aside slightly so as to dip his hand between her legs, rubbing that sweet spot through her jeans—fuck, he could feel her heat and dampness even through the denim—she moaned loudly and bucked her hips into his touch while simultaneously tugging painfully at his hair, but the sting only served to spur him on, heightening his excitement to a fever pitch...

With an animalistic growl, he moved to yank up her shirt, eager to suckle and squeeze her gorgeous, brilliant tits, to taste her milky flesh before he took her...

"W-wait," Hermione unexpectedly gasped in protest, grabbing his wrists and stopping him much as he'd stopped her moments before—only this time Ron was the one left blinking down at her in a state of utter befuddlement, his brain feeling sluggish, as the majority of his blood was now centered in the lower portion of his anatomy.

"What's wrong?" he breathed, concern breaking through his cloud of lust. Absently, he tucked a wayward curl behind her ear. "I thought you wanted—?"

"I do!" she assured him quickly. "But...leave the shirt. Please." There was something akin to shame or embarrassment in her eyes as she gazed up at him imploringly and bit her lower lip. Despite his concern for her, he couldn't help but admire how gorgeous she looked with her cheeks flushed, how her wild, frizzy curls were spread all over her pillow, and her chest was still heaving in evident excitement.

As the fog in his brain slowly but surely cleared and comprehension set in, Ron leaned up and braced himself over her, struggling to calm his over-excited body and to focus on the matter at hand: "Hermione, it—it's not a big deal, y'know. You don't have to be embarrassed. You're still beautiful, love; that hasn't changed."

Despite his best effort at making his words as sincere and heartfelt as possible—he'd meant everything he'd said, after all—she merely appeared skeptical as she shifted beneath him, clearly attempting to move out from under him; Ron complied wordlessly, rolling off of her and allowing her to sit up at his side.

"I know it's ugly, Ron," she finally said with a weary sigh. "You don't have to say things that aren't true just to make me feel better."

Fucking hell, was that what she really thought? That he was *lying*?

Her self-deprecating words effectively killing the mood—not to mention his erection—he scrubbed his unshaven face with both hands while swinging his legs over the side of the bed, as he experienced a piercing stab of renewed frustration, raw grief, and sudden rage: *She* had done this to the woman that he loved, done this to *them*.

Ron often thought that he was dealing with the loss of the twins okay, but sometimes the worst of his emotions hit him like a Bludger to the head, hard and unexpectedly—and seeing Hermione like this...fuck, it stirred up his hatred all over again and made his blood boil, and in his mind's eye he relived that monster Lestrage plunging her cursed dagger into Hermione's stomach. (Actually, this image haunted him at all times, whether sleeping or awake, even if he sometimes, if only for a few brief moments, managed to distract himself.)

He saw the shocking scarlet of her blood and the helpless terror and realization on her face as their babies were murdered before his very eyes and the girl that he loved, that he intended to marry, was permanently scarred, both physically and psychologically. It was strange, but he barely even remembered the agony of his own torture at the hand of the evil hag; it was like the horror of everything else that had happened that night had overshadowed it and rendered it unimportant... irrelevant. And it *was* those things. Ron would gladly be tortured again if it meant he could protect Hermione, if it meant he could go back in time and save their children...

Why hadn't he acted more quickly? Why the *fuck* had he dropped his wand to begin with?

For the millionth time, Ron imagined what he might have done differently: Instead of freezing up

at the sight of that blade pressed against her throat and dropping his wand like a bloody cowardly sod, why hadn't he just taken a shot at the hag? If he'd only tried to stun her, even if he'd accidentally hit Hermione in the process, she and the babies would've been okay...

"What if you hadn't been quick enough, Ron?" his dad had reasoned with him at the beginning of summer. "What if you'd missed altogether? If you'd taken that chance and hadn't succeeded, I've no doubt that Lestrangle would have killed Hermione on the spot. You reacted appropriately, son. In all likelihood, your actions saved her life, and I couldn't be more proud of you."

Ron knew that his dad was probably right. (He usually was.) And if he'd lost Hermione as well, especially as a direct result of his own actions Well, he couldn't bring himself to linger over that possible outcome. It was too horrible to imagine.

But, damn it all to hell, why hadn't he done *something* to save his babies?

For the first time since that awful night, Ron felt himself begin to crumble—yet he fought the overwhelming urge tooth and nail: He would *not* break down in front of her. He had to stay strong for her.

It was moments like this that he longed to say "Fuck it" and hunt down the bitch and that little fucking pansy-arsed ferret, consequences be damned. He didn't really care if he died in the process as long they—along with Voldemort, since that bigoted, arrogant prick was the ultimate cause of it all—suffered excruciating deaths, save for one thing: He couldn't do that to Hermione. He couldn't leave her. Or his family and Harry, for that matter, but mostly he couldn't leave Hermione after everything she'd been through, and now, most recently, she'd faced changing her parents' memories on her own, 'cause she'd stubbornly refused his help...

It was Hermione who kept him anchored here for the immediate future, with those who had caused so much pain and suffering out of reach: He was impatient with his driving desire to begin the search for Voldemort's Horcruxes as soon as possible, 'cause that would eventually lead them to Voldemort himself, and consequently to Lestrangle and Malfoy. He knew that it could take months, or even years, but at least he'd feel like he was achieving something besides sitting around with his thumb up his arse.

Regardless of all of his pent-up hatred and his desire for vengeance, though, he knew he had to focus on one thing at a time, and right now what mattered was Hermione and her wellbeing: Thoughts of Hermione and of a possible Voldemort-less future with her were what had grounded him during the long, torturous weeks of summer that they'd been apart; it's what had helped him get through every day that he wasn't out there hunting down Horcruxes; it's what had, in fact, prompted him to seek out Fred and George to see if their offer still stood in spite of the fact that fatherhood was no longer on his immediate horizon.

At that thought, he finally turned to face her, allowing his hands to slide from his face as he pushed everything but her to the back recesses of his mind, locking all else in a drawer for the time being. "You know I've never been good with words," he finally said in a calm, measured tone, "but it's important that you hear me out and believe what I'm telling you. Can you do that for me, Hermione?"

She looked like she wanted to say something, but instead she merely nodded, possibly in response to the seriousness of his tone, and Ron found himself unwittingly admiring everything about her—from the spattering of light freckles across her nose and delicate cheekbones to how pink and swollen her plump lips were, a combined result of their heavy snogging and her habit of chewing on her lower lip while anxious or deep in thought.

"All right," he breathed when she peered at him expectantly, still not entirely sure what he was

going to say. "Good. Er...I just want you to know that I, um, I always thought you were pretty—I mean, beautiful," he corrected quickly, his ears going warm at how childish his words sounded. "You're beautiful to me, and I know that you don't think you're...good-looking or whatever, but believe me when I say that blokes notice how..."—*hot, fit, fuckable*, his mind supplied—"gorgeous you've become—not that you weren't *always* gorgeous, but the last couple o'years you've really..." Shit. He was rambling. And not very eloquently. "And I know you think that scar is ugly, but it's a part of you, and I happen to think that everything on you is sexy. Even that scar."

She quirked her eyebrows doubtfully, but it was apparent that she was trying not to grin. "Really?"

"Really. Especially the scar."

"Not exactly poetry," she said with a grudging laugh, "but you can be very sweet. When you want to be."

He felt a lopsided grin spread across his face, and, emboldened, he thought, *Sod it, she already knows I'm a sap at heart anyway*, and said, "It's a reminder to me of how strong you are—as if I could forget, but still—your scar says that even though that bitch took something irreplaceable from both of us, she couldn't take your spirit."

Reaching out for her, he tenderly cupped her face, his thumb rubbing gentle circles on the soft flesh of her cheek, and he relished in the way she leaned into his touch as if she craved even the slightest contact with him. "She couldn't break you, Hermione." Yep, he was definitely one cheesy sonuvabitch, but he found he didn't give a rat's arse. Didn't birds like this romantic talk? 'Sides, he meant every word, and they'd made a promise to each other after her accident with the potion that they'd be honest with each other from then on. "And your spirit's one o'the things I've always loved about you—and I do love you. That hasn't changed. I said it once and I'll say it again: You're it for me, sweetheart."

A soft but pleased smile lit up her face. "Even though I'm 'barmy' and 'mental' and all that other rubbish you're always spouting on about?"

"Especially 'cause of all that stuff." He chuckled gently, leaning in to plant an affectionate peck to the tip of her nose. "Matter o'fact, the barmier the better."

"Is that so? I suppose I should watch out for Luna, then, should I?"

"Okay, I take it back—you're the only barmy girl I want."

Hermione laughed. "Sorted. So...you're really not repulsed by it? My scar, I mean. Not even a little?" He could tell by the look in her eyes that they were talking about more than just the physical appearance of the scar, but what it must represent in her mind: The loss of their unborn children and the blame she'd clearly placed on herself.

"Bloody hell, woman," he said with a laugh, rolling his eyes in mock-irritation and choosing to keep things light—otherwise they'd be going around in circles for hours, or days, even. "Weren't you listening to a bleedin' word I said?"

In response, she reached up and framed his face with both her small hands and looked into his eyes. Ron couldn't help but wonder what she was thinking about in the moments before she closed the distance between their bodies and slid her silky lips against his in a lingering kiss that was decidedly different than their previous ones: While their prior embraces had spoken of desire and passion and fire, this one was slow, tender, and deliberate, a silent communication of their

deep love and devotion to one another—and even though Ron's lower anatomy couldn't help but respond instinctually of its own accord, he didn't experience the same driving desire to claim her on a primal level as he had before. This time, his pressing desire was to show her how loved she was, how beautiful he found her, body and spirit.

And she really was beautiful. He wished she could see it.

"C'mon," he breathed as their lips hesitantly parted at long last. "Let's get outta here. But could you put on something pretty first? For me? Not that you wouldn't look fuck-hot in a potato sack," he added with a chortle, "but I sorta planned something, which, by the way, is the only reason I hesitated earlier..."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this was, admittedly, a short chapter, but before you kill me, please let me explain: The above portion was ready to go, so I figured I could either make you guys wait until I'd written the next portion before posting, OR I could go ahead & post what I'd written WHILE I'm working on the next portion... See my logic there? ;)

I promise they'll do the deed in the next chapter, which I plan on having up as soon as possible. As always, thank you for your continued support. :) Hope you enjoyed!

What do you think Ron has planned?

Chapter 35: Angels' Wings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Waiting Place

Chapter Thirty-Five: Angels' Wings

oOo

This chapter is set during the summer before the events of

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

oOo

She had no idea what to expect when Ron announced that he had planned something, but she assumed that he meant a date of some sort, since he'd asked her to wear something "pretty." Therefore, after a fair amount of consideration, she reluctantly borrowed the button-down dress in dark blue and the pair of high-heeled sandals that she'd always admired from her mother's wardrobe (It wasn't as if Mum would miss them, Hermione couldn't help but think bitterly.): The dress reached just a few inches above her knee and hugged her just right, giving her the appearance of having curves, and she deliberately left the first four buttons undone to give Ron a tantalizing view.

After hastily applying a copious amount of Sleakeazy's, pulling her hair back in a deliberately messy bun, and sleeking on a bit of pale lip color, she studied the effect in the full-length mirror of her parents' closet: Admittedly, she felt a bit self-conscious, having no idea how to pull off sexy yet classy the way her mother so effortlessly managed it; although having similar petite frames, Mum filled out the dress better than Hermione, and the outfit in question would be more suited for someone who exuded self-confidence, like Parvati Patil or Fleur Delacour.

Yet Ron's reaction proved well worth her discomfort: His blue eyes glazed over at the sight of her. "Wow," he breathed, his voice notably ragged as he gave her a sweep from head-to-toe, quite blatantly undressing her with his eyes and consequently making her blush. "I mean...*wow*."

He closed the distance between them like a man on a mission, his hands immediately seizing her by her hips and pulling her flush against his body, allowing her to feel his ever-present erection through their clothing. (At least, his erection *seemed* ever-present, since he appeared to have one about eighty percent of the time that they were together these days—and Hermione would gladly take that compliment, thank you very much.)

"Fucking hell, it's a good thing I wanked earlier," he confessed, his voice a low chuckle as he pressed his forehead against hers and possessively squeezed her hips in his massive grip, "'cause I want you so sodding bad I don't think I could resist taking you right now if I hadn't..."

Hermione was aware on a certain level that she should admonish him for his blatant lack of finesse, but she found that she couldn't do anything more than suck in a gulp of air as warmth flooded her nether regions, and Ron—rather disappointingly—pulled away and adjusted himself in his trousers.

"Let's get outta here, yeah?" He cleared his throat, making an obvious effort at pulling himself together while running a hand through his ginger hair, causing it to stand on end. "'Cause I don't

have a whole bloody lotta self-control, and I wanna do this right."

Before she could ask what it was, precisely, that he wanted to do right, Ron grasped her hand and Disapparated them away, never mind the fact that he hadn't yet received his license—and Hermione unexpectedly found herself in a dirty, paved alleyway that she at first assumed must be Diagon Alley. After glancing about and gaining her bearings, however, she realized, much to her combined amusement and bafflement, that Ron had brought them to Muggle London. A questionable part of Muggle London, at that.

"Ron, what—?"

"Just...trust me," he said with a mischievous grin, and his carefree attitude was contagious. Feeling almost jubilant for the first time all summer, she beamed up at him before lacing her arm through his and accompanying him out onto the street: Hermione observed that even though the sun had set, and it was a cool, drizzly evening, the young, happy pub-goers seemed utterly oblivious to the chill in the air in their quests for a good time on a Saturday night.

Tightening his hold on her protectively—and maybe even a bit possessively, which she found that she didn't mind in the least—Ron lead them a little ways down the sidewalk, and as they ducked through the door of a lively-looking place with upbeat folk music being performed on a small stage in a corner, he finally explained with a laugh, "Fred and George come here sometimes after work to unwind. I've been here with 'em a few times, and I reckon I like it better than the Leaky Cauldron."

She smiled, touched by his effort at gallantry when he pulled out her chair, and they took a seat at a table near the back exit. His light manner notwithstanding, she couldn't help but notice that he kept his hand near the pocket of his jeans where his wand was concealed, and his eyes darted toward the front door every few seconds: Given the events of recent months, his caution was more than a bit understandable.

Although his choice in setting was a tad surprising, seeing as how he'd always, in the past, seemed uncomfortable when dealing with "Muggle things," it wasn't necessary for him to explain the appeal: Hermione was well aware that here, in the Muggle world, they weren't nearly as exposed. Here, their chances of being recognized or singled out as "blood traitor" and "Mudblood" by one of Voldemort's followers or sympathizers were minimal to the extreme.

Here, Ron and Hermione were nothing more than two anonymous young lovers in a pub, and after a couple of pints, Ron began to visibly relax, and Hermione found herself laughing at him as he, quite ridiculously yet hysterically, attempted to suck ale up his nose through a straw.

"Fred made this look a helluva lot easier," he choked out in defeat after managing to snort the ale all over the already-sticky table.

She hid a giggle behind her own pint as she took a dainty sip, admittedly enjoying herself despite her initial bewilderment. It was the first pub she'd been in outside the magical world, and she found that she rather enjoyed the casual setting, from the Muggle band on the small stage to the university students playing a game of darts in the corner to the bikers at the bar.

It was a relaxed atmosphere, and everyone seemed to be having a good time, which was precisely what Hermione needed. She honestly couldn't remember the last time she'd simply allowed herself to let loose and just have fun. Well, she supposed that she and Ron had had fun over Easter holiday, but even then they'd been confined for the most part to her mother's opera and dinner-in-posh-restaurants schedule—not to mention her parents' watchful eyes.

Now, conversely, they had nowhere to be. (Ron had assured her that Mrs. Weasley had given

them her blessing to go out.) They weren't under someone else's roof, there wasn't a specific time they had to be back, and she wasn't strapped down by the pressures of her schoolwork. Certainly, they would have to face the very real threat of Voldemort in the near future, but, for now, they were free to go wherever the night took them—a prospect that excited her immensely.

For the first time, Hermione felt free to simply enjoy being young and in love.

"Bravo!" she said with a smirk and a clap, practically yelling to be heard over the band as Ron hastily swiped at the beer he'd spilled with a few napkins before downing the remainder of his pint. "Am I supposed to be impressed by that...display?"

"What, you didn't like that one?" he said with a chuckle, a playful glint in his slightly bloodshot eyes.

She shrugged in what she hoped was a flirtatious manner. "I've seen better."

"You mean better than...this?"

"Better than what, exactly?" she asked in amused confusion since he hadn't actually done anything new other than to break out into a wide, smug grin.

Maybe it was a result of the pleasant buzzing sensation in her head and the warm feeling in her limbs, or perhaps it was simply the feeling of rare jubilation that had settled over her being, but, whatever the reason, he somehow seemed even more handsome than usual in the dim lighting of the pub: She couldn't help but admire the curve of his biceps that seemed to strain against the short sleeves of his shirt and the notable broadness throughout his shoulders and chest. While still lanky in build, a couple of hours on a broomstick several days a week had done his upper body quite a service indeed.

Her gaze then shifted to his freckled hands that currently clutched his mug on the tabletop: They really were quite...large, weren't they? As were his feet, not to mention his... Yes, that particular appendage was quite impressive as well.

Hermione felt herself blush hotly as she raised her own mug to her lips, wondering how he would react if she decided that she fancied doing something so dramatically uncharacteristic as to cop a feel beneath the table—when she suddenly realized that she felt something tucked behind her right ear that hadn't been there before. Promptly setting the mug back down, she reached behind her ear in bewilderment and plucked out what she discovered upon inspection to be a single, perfect white rose.

"Ron," she breathed in delighted astonishment, glancing up at him. "How did you...?"

"Magic," he replied simply, his lopsided grin widening even further.

"Yes, but..." She laughed as she continued to study the perfectly cultured blossom, stroking its delicate, silky petals. "You know, just think how well you could've done at Hogwarts had you only applied half as much effort into your school work as you put into trying to impress me."

He merely shrugged. "Doesn't really make a difference now, does it?"

She knew that he was referring to the fact that they wouldn't be returning for their seventh and final year in the fall. "No, I don't suppose it does," she conceded, her good mood dampened somewhat by the reminder of their upcoming mission as she tucked the flower behind her ear once more.

"Sides," he added as he raised a hand and brushed the corner of her mouth with his knuckle,

"you're a subject that actually interests me. Now, maybe if Hogwarts'd offered a class on...the history of Quidditch or something, or...how best to charm witches..."

She raised an admonishing eyebrow, but she couldn't help but laugh. "Thank you, Ron. It's lovely." For emphasis, she leaned over and kissed his lips affectionately, her entire body humming as he edged closer to her and gently threaded his fingers in her hair, tenderly returning her embrace.

As their lips finally parted after a small eternity, and the noise of the pub intruded on Hermione's consciousness once more, Ron seemed to shake himself, residual desire evident in his voice as he shrugged and said, "I saw it in Diagon Alley earlier today when I was closing up shop for Fred and George, and I thought of you."

She noted that his ears went a slight shade redder at this confession, as if embarrassed, so she reached up and caressed his unshaven face, delighting in its scratchiness, in an effort to accentuate her appreciation at the romantic gesture. "Well, it was very thoughtful of you."

Ron's hand shot up to his face then, his warm palm covering her much smaller one as his blue eyes bore into hers. "You know I love you, right?" His tongue darted out briefly, moistening his full lips.

She could barely make out his words over the music and the chattering in the pub, but they were unmistakable nevertheless.

"I do." She smiled. "And I hope you know that I love you as well. More than anything." She spoke as clearly and as concisely as possible, watching as his eyes fluttered closed as if physically affected by her words.

Truly, there was so much more that she wanted to say to him, such as how sorry she was that she'd adamantly refused to go into hiding when he'd asked her to, and how grateful she was of him for being there for her—both when she was pregnant and now that she wasn't. She was well aware that someone with less integrity and character and honor would never have stuck around, and Ron had those qualities in spades; while still immature in many respects, he had grown up in the last months—as had she, for that matter—and proven himself to be the sort of man that she knew that her father would be proud to have as a son-in-law.

Looking back at the past year, or years, really, since every year that they'd attended Hogwarts had been significant, it was difficult to imagine that they were the same Ron and Hermione that had met that day on the Hogwarts Express six years ago and thus negated the silly storybook notion of love at first sight. (Quite the contrary, as it turned out, true love—love that had the capability of withstanding hardships—was built on friendship and nurtured over time.)

Hermione knew that now, however, in this very public setting, wasn't the right moment to say those things to him, so instead she allowed her hand to slide from his face and land on his upper thigh—and she thought she saw his chest inflate sharply at the suggestive gesture.

She hid a self-satisfied grin by taking another sip of ale. "So," she said when she'd placed her mug on the tabletop once more, giving his thigh a deliberate squeeze beneath the table. "When you said that you'd planned something, I have to say, this isn't what I'd expected—not that I'm complaining," she added quickly as she indicated the pub.

"Well, I thought about a fancy restaurant or something, but I reckoned it'd do us both a bit o'good to just get out, y'know, have some fun."

"I agree. It was a good choice."

"Sides, this isn't all I have planned," he added after a moment, quirking a cocky eyebrow.

"Oh?"

"I can't tell you what!" he retorted with a chuckle, now absently shredding a napkin. "It'd ruin the surprise."

"I see." She grinned at him on sudden inspiration. "C'mon." Rising to her feet, she reached for him and tugged on his arm, ignoring the effects of the alcohol that made her feel a bit... disconnected from everything else and everyone else in the room except for Ron.

Her head was in a cloud, and she found that she quite liked it.

"Where're we going?" he asked, clear amusement in his voice as he allowed himself to be dragged to his lumbering height.

"You're going to dance with me. Y'know, make up for the Yule Ball."

"Yeah, like you didn't do any dancing at the Yule Ball," he snorted while allowing himself to be pulled onto the small but crowded dance floor. The band was no longer performing, and instead contemporary dance music was now thudding throughout the cramped, dark space that comprised the club. "Hermione, these Muggles look like they're shagging in public—"

Pushing her body close to his and slinking her arms up his chest and around his neck, she cut him off by pressing her lips hotly against his in a searing kiss. Ron responded instantaneously, his hands landing on her hips as he returned her passion in kind, his tongue probing her in a way that recalled images of his tongue exploring other areas of her anatomy...

"I dunno how to dance to this kinda music," he confessed in a pant once their lips had broken apart, and she chuckled at the jerky movements he was making while glancing about at the other patrons, clearly attempting to mimic their movements.

"Neither do I, really. Just...sort of sway your hips to the music," she said with a laugh, placing his large hands atop her hips and demonstrating the simple, albeit suggestive movement. "Like this."

"So this is what Muggles call dancing, eh? It's more like some sorta...barmy mating ritual or something. I gotta warn ya, 'Ermione, you keep moving like that against me, and I may just have to say 'sod it' to my plans and Apparate us back to your house."

"Ron, quit saying that," she admonished with a chuckle and a good-natured eye-roll, even as her face flushed hotly at his admission.

"What, 'barmy'? 'Mating ritual'?"

She nearly laughed at his genuine puzzlement as they continued moving together, the rhythmic *thump-thump-thump* of the bass pulsing through her being, melding her to Ron. "Oh, honestly. 'Muggle,' Ron. And 'Apparate.' You have to remember where you are."

"Hermione, you just said those things," he pointed out with a low chortle.

"Yes, but I was just—oh, never mind, you infuriating prat."

As he continued to chuckle, clearly amused by his ability to get her all flustered, she grinned wickedly before turning in his arms and deliberately pressing her bum into his groin, grinding against him unabashedly.

"Now that's just playing dirty, 'Ermione,'" he groaned, and she delighted in the feel of his aggressive hands on her hips, pulling her more firmly against his semi-erection as she raised one arm, encircling his neck from behind. "Fuck, you're so hot." His breath was hot against her ear, causing her to shiver in delight.

"So you've said."

"You didn't dance like this for Krum. Trust me, I was watching that night—very bloody closely, in fact."

"Good to know." She couldn't help but smile, feeling pleased by his reaction as she allowed the music to wash over her and guide her movements. In point of fact, she'd never danced like this before—ever—but it wasn't so difficult, especially with the euphoria-inducing effects of the alcohol combined with the carefree atmosphere in the pub—not to mention Ron's nearness.

"Sodding prick," he grumbled for good measure, yet he couldn't hide the small smile that quirked up the corners of his lips.

"He was a gentleman," she defended the famous Quidditch star with a laugh.

"'Gentleman' my arse—I saw the way he looked at you, and believe me when I say there was nothing bloody 'gentlemanly' about it."

Hermione laughed again as she turned in his arms once more, gazing up at his familiar features.

"Aren't you chivalrous for being so concerned about my honor and wellbeing," she teased.

"Really, are we going to continue to discuss Viktor? Because I was under the impression that we were meant to be having fun tonight."

"We are having fun. I'm having fun. Are you having fun?"

She cocked an eyebrow while gazing up at his playful expression. "Come with me, let's get out of here," she said on sudden impulse, tugging on his arm once more, only this time weaving them through the throng in the direction of the front entrance. "I thought I saw a tattoo parlor across the street..."

"Tat...come again?"

His expression appeared so taken aback that she couldn't help but laugh, tightening both arms around his elbow as they pushed their way out onto the sidewalk.

"You heard me."

"Bloody hell, woman, you must be outta your bleedin' mind...either that or just pissed off your rocker."

"Actually, I believe I'm thinking more clearly than I ever have in my life."

oOo

He couldn't believe they'd actually done it.

He never would have believed that Hermione—as in Hermione Granger, *his* Hermione—would not only make such a boldly uncharacteristic suggestion—but that she would manage to convince him that it was a good idea and actually bloody go through with it. (She'd always had the capability of keeping him guessing, that was for damned sure.)

A twin set of small but beautiful angels' wings, still smarting quite a lot and throbbing beneath a white bandage, now adorned the underside of Ron's forearm just beneath the crook of his elbow, an exact mirror of the design on the top of Hermione's right foot.

To his utter amazement, she appeared to have given this whole thing a fair bit of forethought, as she'd seemed to know exactly what it was she was looking for as she'd flipped through the tattoo artist's design album with a feverish, determined expression that he'd only previously observed on her face while she prepared for a rather difficult school examination.

"Here," she'd said firmly the moment she'd found what she was looking for. "This is what I want. A twin set, actually."

As soon as he'd had set eyes on the design, he'd known: Angels' wings. Caleb and Anna. Had she been planning this all summer? Dreaming of memorializing their lost children in such a manner?

He should've known that this hadn't been a mere act of impulse, as Hermione Granger rarely did anything without first weighing the outcome from every possible angle, acting only when the logical conclusion—well, logical in her mind but usually completely mental in Ron's—had been obtained.

As for Ron, well, he hadn't hesitated to get one as well once he'd realized what the angels' wings represented. Unfortunately, though, and much to his extreme embarrassment, he'd been a bit of a tit about it once the needle had actually touched his skin; Hermione, on the other hand, had barely so much as winced and bit her lip during the entire procedure despite the delicate placement of her own.

And now they were both tattooed.

Yep. Mum was gonna kill 'em both, that was for sure. Well, maybe she wouldn't if Ron could actually manage to get out what the tattoos meant before she decided to go on a murderous rampage.

Ron and Hermione exchanged a giddy, carefree glance as they exited the tattoo parlor, their hands latching together as if of their own accord and their fingers intertwining while they practically jogged down the lamp-lit pavement, oblivious to the now rather happily intoxicated pub-goers.

"I can't believe we just did that," Hermione stated, throwing her head back in a gleeful laugh. "I feel so...so..."

"Sore?" Ron provided with a chuckle. "How's the foot?"

"I was going for 'alive,' but that'll work, too." She looked down, surveying the top of her sandal-clad foot before glancing at his bandaged forearm. "It'll be better once we get somewhere so I can heal our tattoos properly. Right now they're just open wounds."

He snorted at that. "'His and her tattoos,' that's a new one by me. Bill and Fleur just picked out china patterns..."

Leading him into the nearest alley, she bit her lip as she reached up and fondly patted his cheek. "I wouldn't be opposed to that as well, but let's help Harry defeat Voldemort first, all right?"

"Yeah, I thought you might say that." Never before had he wished so vehemently that You-Know-Who would just crawl back into whatever hole he'd crawled out of and leave the world in peace—leave him and Hermione in peace. He reckoned he'd have to accept that there was a very real chance that they might not survive, but at least he had something to motivate him to get through it alive: the hope of a Voldemort-less future with Hermione and possible children that he

could only dream about, surrounded by loving aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents.

And that was why, other than his driving sense of loyalty and friendship, he couldn't *not* go with Harry: He and Hermione had to do everything in their power to help Harry kill that right bloody bastard for good. Although thoughts of revenge and what he might do to Malfoy or Lestrangle should he cross their paths along the way frequently invaded his mind, especially during his darkest moments, he grudgingly admitted to himself that he just wanted this whole thing to be over with so they could move on with their lives.

That was the last thought that crossed his mind before he stepped behind the nearest dumpster and firmly grasped her hand. He then turned on the spot before she could take the lead and concentrated with all his might on not splinching them both or landing them on the bottom of the ocean...

To his immense relief, when he opened his eyes once more he saw that they had successfully arrived at the destination he'd intended. (See? He reckoned he was getting the hang of this Apparition business. He still cursed that examiner for failing him for leaving behind half a bloody eyebrow.)

They were in a dark space, with only a minimal amount of starlight pouring in from long, vertical stain glass windows, and Ron immediately detected the telling sounds of a torrential downpour, the fact of which was corroborated by thick rivulets on the windowpanes.

"Ron, where—?"

"The Muggle library in Ottery St. Catchpole. *Lumos*."

Abruptly, their surroundings were bathed by the bluish tinge from his wand tip, and he could now make out the high, cathedral-like ceiling—he was fairly sure the place had once been a church—and the endless rows of shelves with their dusty books.

"We really shouldn't be here," Hermione said slowly, sounding uncertain, yet Ron couldn't help but smile that she'd already made her way over to the nearest bookcase and was running her fingers almost lovingly over the volumes as if mesmerized.

"You're welcome," he replied with a smug laugh.

She *tsk*'ed. "It's not as if I can check any of these books out, Ron. This library isn't even open."

"Such a stickler for the rules, Hermione—even when you're actively breaking 'em. Just relax, enjoy yourself, yeah? We're here to have fun, remember?"

"Yes, because the library has always been a source of 'fun' for you," she retorted, randomly pulling a volume from the shelf and flipping through its pages by the light of her own lit wand.

"Oh, I've been known to have fun in the library," he countered, moving closer to her and waggling his eyebrows suggestively. "Reckon you must've already forgotten a couple o'months back when you cast that Disillusionment Charm on yourself and crawled beneath the table and—"

"All right!" She closed the book with a *thud* and placed it back on the shelf, and Ron felt satisfied to see her face flushing in the dim lighting. "Yes, that was fun, but admittedly...ill-conceived. If we'd gotten caught, we both would've been in a lot of trouble."

"I think you like doing things a bit on the dangerous side, don't ya?" he murmured, absently fingering a tendril of her hair that had come loose while she continued to huff and blush indignantly. "You don't fool me for a second, Hermione."

She rolled her eyes, but her heart didn't seem to be in it. "Oh, honestly, I do n—"

He shut her up with a kiss, his hands framing her face firmly while he pressed his body flush against hers, not being shy about letting her feel how turned on he was by her, about how she clouded his mind, merging on his very being until there was nothing left but him and her, a single living, breathing entity.

And the primal nature of the things he wanted to do with her, *to* her... Fuck, he wanted her. Here. Now. In this fucking library.

"Wait, Ron—our tattoos," she whispered in a pant, breaking off their embrace after several sweltering moments.

"Oh. Right. Yeah."

He smiled sheepishly, and Hermione gingerly removed their bandages one at a time, healing their designs with a complicated-looking wave of her wand. "Better?"

"Yeah. Thanks." For a moment, he admired the angels' wings branded to his forearm, experiencing as he did so a sharp sting of remorse for their lost little ones that he would now never have a chance to know. He couldn't help but compare the placement of the tattoo to the brand that marked the Death Eaters, and Ron reckoned that his mark represented the exact opposite of theirs: Theirs were all about hatred and bigotry, while his was a celebration of love and life. "Oh, hey," he said suddenly, coming back to himself as he reached over Hermione's shoulder and plucked a book from the shelf. "What d'you reckon this one's about?"

She graced him with a strange expression, her forehead puckering into a quizzical frown. "Well, according to the cover it's *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* by Dr. Seuss." She smiled then, and he had a hunch that she was recalling the time she'd told him that her father had read that book to her quite frequently when she was a little girl. "This was my favorite," she murmured, opening the thin, hardback volume—and Ron watched closely as she gasped, her eyes widening perceptibly...and then she plucked something from between the pages and held it up to her wand tip with an expression of astonishment on her pretty face: It was a simple but elegant diamond ring with a white-gold band.

As he waited for her to say something, his heart feeling like it was trying to escape from his bloody chest, a loud crack of thunder shook the entire building and seemed to startle her out of her thoughts. She shook her head as if to clear it before whispering, "Ron..."

"It isn't much," he said a bit self-consciously while nervously flattening his hair with the palm of his hand, "but it's the best I could do with the advance Fred and George gave me at the beginning o'summer, and I've been working to pay 'em back since. If you want, maybe later...y'know, after we've survived the bloody war, maybe you can come with me and pick out a different one, a better one, whatever you want... Or—or we can do it before then. If you want. I'd have to take this one back and ask the twins for another advance, but—"

"No," she said firmly, cutting him off as she slipped the engagement ring onto her finger, admiring it; Ron breathed a sigh of relief that it fit, just as Ginny had said that it would. "It's lovely, Ron. It's perfect." She continued to admire the small, glittering diamond on her finger for several moments as if in a daze before finally looking up at him once more and quirked a playful eyebrow. "Is this your official proposal, then?"

"Oh, I, uh, well...yeah." He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. "I reckon I should get down on one knee, then, eh? Like that bloke in that film we watched with your parents?"

"It isn't necessary," she said with a giggle, and his ears warmed as he realized that he sounded like a blabbering idiot. "I mean, unless you just *want* to."

"Not really, no," he retorted with a nervous chortle, suddenly wishing he'd planned this a bit better. Was he expected to give a speech, or should the proposal itself work to express everything he felt for her? "I think you're brilliant," he finally blurted and immediately felt his ears heat up once more at his less than poetic words.

"And I think you're brilliant as well."

"Er, thanks. What I mean is, I wanna spend the rest o' my life with you, Hermione, and, y'know, try our hand at having kids again...at some point down the line. And I reckon the prospect of a wedding might give us something to live for, something to help...motivate us to survive."

She smiled at him, her hand coming up to affectionately caress his unshaven face. "We already have plenty to live for, Ron, but, even still, I have a proposal of my own: After we've survived this, we'll get married. As soon as possible. The very day that Voldemort is finally gone for good, or the day after, or whenever you want."

He couldn't stop the wide grin that cracked his face. "You've got yourself a deal. And don't think I'm letting you back out, so did ya wanna give it to me in writing so I can hold you to it?"

She laughed and rolled her eyes. "I think my word will have to suffice, but don't worry, I won't forget or change my mind. I promise you that." Then she stood on the tips of her toes and pressed a chaste yet lingering kiss against his lips.

"So...did you see what page your ring was stuck to?" Ron asked once their lips had parted.

"What? Oh." She glanced down at the forgotten book in her hands before holding it up and reading aloud, "'You'll get mixed up, of course, as you already know. You'll get mixed up with many strange birds as you go—'"

"See? That's you, a 'strange bird.' That passage made me think of you."

She actually whacked him with the book, but she was laughing as she did it, which Ron reckoned was a good thing since it meant she wasn't really trying to kill him.

"So what now?" he asked once they'd both stopped laughing and were simply staring at each other almost shyly, their eyes flickering periodically toward the ring on her finger.

Hermione bit her lip. "Well, I have a couple of ideas. Have you ever heard of the Muggle children's game, Hide and Seek? I used to play it at my nana's with my cousins, and it was always more exciting during storms." Without another word, she turned on her heel and marched away, disappearing behind another row of shelves and leaving Ron to scratch his head in bewilderment.

"Hermione?"

"Close your eyes, count to twenty, and come and find me," her voice drifted toward him, punctuated by a flash of lightning from the storm raging outside.

"You're one strange bird, you know that," he called back, but he was grinning like a bloody idiot as he closed his eyes as instructed and began counting aloud. Feeling a bit ridiculous but undeniably excited—his heart was racing inexorably in his chest—Ron started off in the direction she'd disappeared once he'd finished counting, his wand held high to light the way.

At first he encountered nothing but more dusty books, the fact of which caused a spike of anxiety

to pierce his heart, and, as improbable as it was, he couldn't help but think about the possibility of Death Eaters lurking in the shadows, ready to strike at any moment. He was on the verge of calling out for her again, but his fears were forgotten in the next instant when he happened upon an article of clothing draped over a book protruding from the shelf: It was a bra.

Feeling a bit astounded—Hermione was certainly in an adventurous mood this evening, wasn't she?—he retrieved it and studied it just long enough to see that it was red and lacy, and certainly a far cry from the virginal under things he'd previously seen her wear.

"Shite," he muttered while hastily stuffing the undergarment into the pocket of his jeans, his heart thudding harder than ever and an erection beginning to take form in his trousers; he was forced to adjust himself for comfort's sake as he continued on, his gaze sweeping across the dusty floor between the rows of shelves for more "clues" she might've left him, shining his wandlight into nooks and crannies...

He felt a bit like he an animal on the prowl for his prey, and, like she'd promised, it was...well, it was bloody exciting—and all his "excitement" was centered in the appendage between his legs at the thought that Hermione was, at that very moment, braless and waiting for him somewhere in the dark.

After another minute or so of searching, his heart about stopped dead in his chest when he stumbled upon a pair of knickers unceremoniously discarded on the floor, and, once he'd stooped to snatch them up, he found that they were made of the same lacy material as the bra. Unable to resist the impulse despite how pervy he knew it was, Ron pressed the lacy material to his nose, breathing in her familiar musky scent that sent a jolt straight to his cock. *Fuck*. And now she didn't have any sodding knickers on. What the bloody fuck was the brilliant, barmy witch trying to do to him, anyway? Send him around the twist in the best possible way?

A bluish glow over the high shelf suddenly catching his attention, he shoved the lacy garment in the pocket opposite the bra before hurrying down the long aisle. He caught sight of her just before he stepped out from between the shelves, his eyes hungrily absorbing her: Hermione was perched precariously on the end of a desk set against the wall, several of her blue ball flames hovering in the air around her and bathing her in their soft glow.

His heart raced in his chest to see that her dress was unbuttoned almost to her navel, her smallish, perfectly plump tits spilling out of it, and in the soft glow he saw that her nipples were enticingly puckered against the chill in the air, and she was abso-fucking-lutely perfect.

To put the icing on the mother-effing cake, the hem of her dress was hiked up around her hips, and her thighs were splayed wide, affording him a clear view of her succulent, inviting pussy. *Fuck, fuck, fuck*. He couldn't help but notice that she was still wearing the high-heeled sandals that she'd borrowed from her mum, and she looked good enough to eat. Literally.

"You caught me," she said simply, her nervous smile at odds with her seductive pose that left zero doubt that she was blatantly offering herself to him.

He swallowed in a hard gulp. "I'm betting this isn't how you played the game when you were little."

"Honestly, are you going to make jokes, or are you going to claim your prize?"

Ron would've been the world's biggest idiot to have to be told twice: He bridged the distance between them in two quick strides, gripping the edge of the desk on the outsides of her thighs as he swooped down and sucked her nipples hard into his mouth without preamble, one after the other, swirling his tongue around her hardened peaks, savoring her...

"Oh, God...*Ron*..."

As he continued to lap, suck, and nip at her silky flesh, lavishing thorough attention on her soft, firm mounds, his hands found her thighs, kneading and massaging none too gently while she squirmed beneath his ministrations.

"Give it to me, Ron, p-please," she begged as her fingertips lightly scratched their way up his back beneath his shirt, her arms clutching him to her in a possessive, desperate manner that had him grinning against her flesh. "I—I can't stand it... Need to feel you..."

He squeezed her thighs in response, his thumbs barely grazing the lips of her scalding-hot cunt, and it took more self-control than he'd ever imagined that he possessed to not immediately give in to her plea. "Don't worry, 'Ermione," he grunted, his voice sounding strained to his own ears as he released the plump tit he'd been happily feasting on, "I'll definitely give it to you, but not before I taste you." And then he dropped to his knees before her as if in worship. Fucking hell, he'd happily worship Hermione's pussy for the rest of his life. He'd never been a religious sorta bloke, but he'd definitely found a religion he didn't mind putting all his bloody faith and energy in...

Then he pressed his long nose into her folds and found his senses overpowered by her, by the delectably erotic sight and smell of her as crouched between her open legs: Ron didn't hesitate to go to town on her, just like he had so many times in recent months, devouring her pretty little pussy with as much enthusiasm as he would his favorite pudding while she squirmed and made the most fuck-hot sounds he'd ever heard and tugged on his hair hard enough to bring tears to his eyes, but he couldn't care less.

Only after she screamed his name in orgasmic abandon and her inner walls had stopped pulsing around his rapidly plunging fingers did he quickly rise to his feet once more, hastily unbuttoning his jeans and freeing his swollen cock. Their foreheads were pressed together, their breathing labored and erratic in dual passion as he slid his throbbing dick through her wet-as-fuck folds and positioned himself at her molten-hot center.

"Use that dirty mouth of yours and tell me you want to fuck me," Hermione gasped suddenly, and his excitement increased tenfold at the unexpected dirty-talk from her prim and proper little mouth.

"Fucking hell, I wanna fuck you, Hermione. I'm gonna fuck your hot, wet pussy 'til you cum again, and then I'm gonna fuck your mouth 'til *I* cum."

She pulled away slightly, and their eyes met—and for a single moment in time Ron thought that he'd gone too far, but then she swallowed audibly and said, "Good. Now shut up and do it."

A growl—an actual *growl*—tore its way from his throat as he gripped her arse in both hands and lifted her on impulse, carrying her effortlessly to the nearby bookcase and trapping her between himself and a row of ancient-looking volumes. After slinging her legs over his shoulders and bracing one hand against the bookcase, Ron gripped his cock and slipped just the head inside her open, ready pussy, and then his eyes met her lustful expression once more, seeking her final reassurance that this was truly what she wanted. After all, the first time they'd made love had been out of necessity in a hospital room, and now they were in a bleedin' library of all places, which wasn't exactly tender or romantic—although he reckoned she'd always fantasized about shagging in a library, and she was clearly just as desperate for him as he was for her.

They could always take things slowly later; he could show her the tenderness and care that she deserved later tonight, in fact. Right now, though, this was about urgent, primal need, purely and simply. Like everything else they'd done tonight, this was about feeling alive.

"Ron," she panted as their foreheads pressed together once more, and his name, a frantic plea from

her lips, was all the permission he needed: He met her eyes while gripping her bum with the hand that wasn't maintaining their precarious balance against the bookshelf, and then he slowly sank into tight, slick, velvety wet heat an inch at a time, gasps escaping their lips in tandem as they savored the feeling of being joined in the most intimate manner possible for the first time since that hospital room where they'd conceived the twins.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. It somehow felt even better than he remembered. She felt ridiculously fucking tight encasing his dick like—like a small, wet fist—only loads better. Loads, *loads* better.

Their first time, along with the insecurities that they'd each taken into the room with them, felt more like a million years ago rather than mere months. Now, in the present, there was no uncertainty—at least not as far as their feelings for each other were concerned; there was no ruddy potion making them do it, and there was no fear of what this meant or what it *didn't* mean, for that matter.

Soon they would embark on a mission with Harry, and Ron had no sodding clue what to expect, but for now he was fucking his fiancée. He was making love to his future wife, and if a lifetime of this wasn't something worth living for, then nothing was.

"Er-my-nee?" he managed to grind out, trying his best to focus past the intense haze of pleasure clouding his brain to the fact that her entire body seemed to be quaking, and she was gripping his upper arm hard enough that he was sure that her tiny fingerprints would be burned into his flesh tomorrow, but sod it if he cared.

When she nodded urgently and whispered for him to give it to her hard, Ron lost it, rearing back his hips and plunging into her again—and again—and again, fueled by her lusty mewls while he watched her tits bounce in time to his hard, fast thrusts. As she scratched his back suddenly, raking her nails hard down his flesh beneath his t-shirt while crying out his name, and her pussy began rapidly squeezing his cock in an impossibly tight vice, he nearly exploded inside her then and there...

"Fuck, sweetheart, you're so fucking hot when you cum all over my dick," he grunted as he tried with all his might not to cum and thereby ending this a lot quicker than he'd prefer...

He slowed his pace to languid but steady thrusts as her shuddering stilled, and the muscles of her legs notably relaxed, draping limply over his shoulders. "Ron...so good," she whispered breathlessly, and he couldn't help but puff out his chest in pride at her affirmation that he was good at shagging.

On sudden inspiration—and feeling undeniably manly—he slipped out of her and lifted her once more, carrying her back to the desk. Once her feet hit the floor, she turned and bent over the desk in a very clear gesture, peering at him expectantly over her shoulder, and the knowledge that she wanted him to do her from behind caused his cock to jerk in anticipation, especially when he stepped between her legs and pushed her dress up, his eyes feasting on the smooth skin of her round backside and her juicy, swollen sex. Wasting no more time, he gripped her arsecheeks and slid inside her cunt once more, the constricting sensation taking away his breath once more.

"Oh!—Oh, Ron!" Hermione gasped, her hands gripping the edge of the desk and her back arching to meet him as he resumed fucking her, his hands on her hips while he drove into her and his bollocks slapped wetly against her flesh with every forward stroke as lightning lit up the room. It was unbelievably fucking hot, watching his dick disappear inside her again and again, and he was struck by how tiny she was compared to him, how beautiful and perfect, and as cheesy as it was he couldn't help but think that her body was made for him; *she* was made for him, and one day she would be his wife and bear his children...

At that thought he couldn't hold it in any longer. As his stomach muscles began to contract with the start of his orgasm, he abruptly pulled out of her and spun her around; Hermione, seeming to know instinctively what was happening and what he wanted, wasted no time in sliding off the desk, kneeling before him, and sucking his cock into her wet little mouth...

"Oh, fuck...unh...'Ermione, *fucking hell*...", he groaned as he released in the back of her throat, his fingers gripping in her wild hair as the pleasure seemed to go on and on and on until he had nothing left to give, and she'd swallowed every last drop of his cum.

At some point, he became aware that they'd sunk to the floor together, and Hermione had Transfigured something into a soft mattress, and his head was now cradled against her still-bared tits. She kissed the top of his head, and Ron wanted to cry when he got a glimpse of the diamond on her finger, glittering in the light of her blue flames—but he refused to cry after sex again like a twat.

"That was perfect," she was whispering, her fingers threading affectionately through his fringe. "Beautiful. Thank you, Ron."

He chuckled weakly at that. "Bloody hell, Hermione, you're thanking *me*? This has been the best bloody night o' my life. Still can't believe I let you talk me into getting a tattoo," he added, surveying his forearm, and they both dissolved into lazy laughter.

"That's because I'm a bad influence, and you're too easy," she murmured, kissing his lips lightly when their laughter had died.

"Yeah, I reckon I am. Easy, that is. And you're definitely a bad influence. Who'd've thought."

She swatted at him playfully, and he caught her wrist, turning them so that his weight was atop her and he was cradled between her splayed thighs: He could feel the wet heat from her pussy, which had his cock immediately stirring anew.

"Let's promise each other something," he said, growing serious as he braced himself over her.

"What's that?" she breathed.

"That we'll survive this bloody thing." His hand found hers, his fingers lacing with hers as both their eyes lingered on her engagement ring. "That we'll live to get married and have our try at more kids."

She smiled up at him tenderly. "We already promised each other that, remember?"

"Yeah, but I'm dead serious: Let's survive this, Hermione."

"All right. I promise, Ron," she whispered, her face losing all traces of playfulness in response to the fierceness of his tone.

"I promise, too." And then he kissed her, slowly and deliberately, as his hands came up between them and began unbuttoning her dress the remainder of the way down.

When their lips at last parted, and Ron started trailing wet, hot kisses down the creamy skin of her chest and abdomen, he felt her stiffen in protest, but he silenced her quickly, kissing the scar on her belly in reverence as he finished peeling the dress from her body. "You're beautiful," he whispered for emphasis against her flesh. "I love you."

And then he showed her exactly how much he loved her, how brave and perfect he found her to be as he made love to her properly, slow and tender like she deserved, even if it didn't last very

long once she'd climbed atop him and rode them both to lingering, shuddering, blissful completion...

"I love you," Hermione whispered once she'd collapsed on his heaving chest, both of them sweating and panting from combined exertion and pleasure. The storm had passed, and the silence in the darkened library was palpable. "We'll survive this, Ron. I promise."

And so they did, even if it wasn't without much hardship and heartache and sacrifice along the way—but survive, they did.

oOo

"Somehow you'll escape

all that waiting and staying.

You'll find the bright places

where Boom Bands are playing.

With banner flip-flapping,

once more you'll ride high!

Ready for anything under the sky."

—From *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* by Dr. Seuss

Chapter End Notes

Story notes: First of all, I'd like to sincerely apologize for the delay in posting this, as over the course of the last month I've dealt with very serious real-life issues, and as such my writing has been placed on the backburner. (Hopefully the fact that this chapter was twice as long as one of my usual chapters makes up for that in part.)

Secondly, I know I said that there would be an epilogue - and I always intended to write one - but due to the aforementioned real-life issues & the fact that I'm very eager to work on my original works, I am absurdly ready to be done with this story. Rest assured, however, that this is where I always intended to end the story, & I haven't ended it here simply for the sake of ending it, although the possibility of a DH-era sequel would definitely be appropriate if I only had the energy or the inclination to devote another year of my life to writing fanfiction.

I think that we can safely assume that Ron & Hermione eventually marry & have their Rose & Hugo in this timeline, but I leave it up to reader opinion to determine how DH might have proceeded given the sequence of events I've laid out in TWP: How would the Horcrux have affected Ron & Hermione differently? Would Ron still have left because of the Horcrux's influence? Would Molly still have killed Bellatrix, or do you think that Ron would've gotten to her first? And what about Draco?

I leave it up to all of you to determine the answers to those questions and any more you might have. :) In the meantime, I still have Permission Slip that I have every intention of continuing, but that also depends on Jes, who seems to have put much of

her fanfic-writing on hold for the time being. I also might write the occasional oneshot or 2 - 3-parter if I get the inclination. ;)

Anywho, again, I would like to thank you all for your support of this story - especially for sticking to it despite the inconvenience of my having to relocate it here from FFnet, which I know was an inconvenience. Thanks for following along, for the comments here & on Twitter & tumblr, & for all of your nominations & votes in the Romione Awards on tumblr! (I'm still flattered & a bit astonished by the outcome of those awards, by the way.) You guys are the best, & I hope you'll continue to support me if/when I get anything original published. I'll certainly keep you posted on Twitter (Kari_FicFanatic) & tumblr (musingsofaficfanatic)!

And lastly - a shout-out to my Twitter girls - and guys (all 2 of you)! Hollah! ;p

-Kari

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