

Understanding

It was dark.

It always started the same way.

There was darkness.

A complete absence of light.

A stillness.

It was all pervading.

A spot of light would appear, stationary in the distance.

He would move towards it. He would have no choice, no influence.

The spot would grow, larger, and larger, until it encompassed him, and he was back.

He was there.

Again.

To his left, Ron and Hermione were fighting back to back. Death Eaters surrounding them, but they were holding their own. He was so proud of them.

In front of him, Lucius Malfoy and Lord Voldemort were waiting for him.

Lucius was laughing. With contempt, Lucius waved his wand at him. And the curse hit him, again.

Pain.

Pain so pure and profound, it almost redefined itself. He wanted to stop, to give in, to die. But he couldn't. He took a step forward, and another. Each one was a testament to his bloody-mindedness.

The blood dripped over his eyes, giving the world a strange crimson tinge.

He reached out and grabbed Lucius' wand. He snapped it. Lucius' face was blank. He couldn't understand.

Lucius died searching for the answer that had eluded him in life.

His hands. They were now killer's hands. They had destroyed life. In front of him now, alone, was the smirking face of Voldemort.

Voldemort's mouth moved, but he couldn't hear the words – he never could. It didn't matter. It never mattered.

He remembered now. The ambush – Voldemort and the Death Eaters trapping him and his friends. Voldemort hadn't expected them all to be able to fight.

He was locked in. He had to see this through to the end. He always did.

Another curse hit him, more painful than before. It didn't matter; it never did.

He looked at the snake-like face of Voldemort and pointed his wand. The complex curse fell from his lips, the words magnified, spreading away from him.

He wanted to take them back; he didn't want to kill again.

Voldemort looked surprised. An honest emotion. His first and his last. He died like that.

The darkness rushed around him, everything had gone into the spell. It had taken everything he had to cast it, and there was nothing left.

He dropped to his knees. The Aurors and the Order arrived. People were talking to him. Death Eaters were rounded up, his friends were crying.

She arrived.

A tear dripped down her cheek. Brown eyes that could be so alive looked tortured. He wanted to reach out, touch her, and reassure her.

But the darkness came as it always did.

He screamed, but it was too late.

It was dark.

Time passed, or maybe it didn't. Without a point of reference, he couldn't tell. The memories kept coming, the guilt slowly receding as he worked through what had happened to him.

It gave him time, to be alone, to exist in the warmth of the darkness and deal.

Ron and Hermione.

Harry and Ginny?

So many people were dead. Remus was the last to go, killed at the end of his sixth year. Wormtail had used his silver hand to the greatest effect, killing the werewolf personally.

But in a way, it had been the end of Wormtail as well. The knowledge that he had killed the last of his friends directly was too much for him. He had passed the spell to Harry, and been found, swinging by his neck, from the rafters of the Shrieking Shack.

In a way, Wormtail had saved him. The spell had given him a new focus. He'd not told the others – he hadn't wanted to worry them. It allowed him to come out of his fifth-year funk and interact with people. It had allowed him to train the D.A. in preparation for the final battle.

The final battle that had never arrived.

They hadn't expected the ambush. No one had a clue. Dumbledore had increased his Occlumency training, and he had learnt to block Voldemort's visions – but it meant that he had no way of seeing what the Dark Lord had in mind.

Draco had set them up. It wasn't a betrayal, it couldn't be – the younger Malfoy had never been on their side.

He had cast the spell that trapped them, and then thrown the object that transported them.

The light appeared again. Once more, he relived the fight. This time it was different. He was outside himself, watching. He saw the expression on his own face.

Cold.

Empty.

The face of a killer.

As Lucius died, his body glowed, and his spirit left his body. It stopped and stared at him. Lucius' spirit bowed slowly, acknowledging defeat, before slowly sinking into the ground.

Voldemort's spirit was darker, more malevolent. It growled at him, tried to attack him, but couldn't seem to get near him.

A spectral light shone on him from above, and the spirit writhed, its gaping maw making soundless screams of pain.

The light grew, and the spirit shrank, till it was gone. Destroyed. Eradicated.

The light continued to grow. Figures appearing and stepping out.

Remus. Sirius. Cedric. Mom. Dad.

One by one, they bowed towards him, and he felt their respect and their love. And their thanks.

He smiled - genuinely.

They slowly turned translucent and stepped back into the light – Sirius giving him a quick wink before he went.

It was dark.

But he was happy. They were avenged. Voldemort was defeated.

His friends were alive.

She was alive.

A new light appeared, and he headed towards it. Faster and faster, as if rising from a great depth.

He could see it now, could see the people surrounding his bed.

He smiled; he'd miss the darkness - it had given him so much.

He burst through the light and opened his eyes.

"Bloody 'ell," he rasped into the room he now recognised as the hospital wing of Hogwarts. "It's bright in here."

He could hear several indrawn breaths, and as he looked around, he identified the people staring at him. To his left were Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Ginny, Mr and Mrs Weasley, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall. He didn't think the room was big enough, but it seemed to have grown a little.

To his right were the rest of the Weasley Family, Severus Snape, Tonks, Fleur, and Hagrid.

Most of the people had tear tracks visible on their faces and solemn expressions.

Solemn expressions that were slowly morphing into identical looks of shock.

Obviously, those were not supposed to be his first words.

As no one seemed to be able to do more than gape at him, he did the first thing that came to mind.

He cast a spell.

As everyone fell to the floor – their chairs now decorating the front lawn – he burst into laughter. Fred and George had somehow managed to land on Snape.

They were the first to react – nothing could keep them quiet for long.

"You're supposed to be dead," Fred informed him cheerfully. They were identical in looks, but not in auras. He could always tell which was which.

"I've heard that before," Harry smirked, helping himself to a glass of water from a pitcher besides his bed.

"In fact," George continued. "You died a few minutes ago."

"Ahhh," Harry exclaimed cheerfully. "That would have been the bright light."

"You didn't go into it?"

"Didn't occur to me," Harry grinned.

"Get off me," Snape growled at the twins.

"I must say, Harry," Fred smirked, "That your replacement chair doesn't seem happy."

"You think I should try again?"

"I'd really rather you didn't, Harry," Dumbledore said, climbing to his feet. "These old bones aren't quite used to sudden falls."

That was the cue for pandemonium to reign in the hospital room as Ron and Hermione launched themselves at Harry, and everyone else started shouting questions as they regained their feet.

"Quiet," Harry bellowed, a sonorous spell ensuring that he was heard by all.

"Thank you," he said at a normal volume. He waved his hand absently, returning the chairs.

"Hermione, what's going on?"

Hermione smiled massively at him and perched herself on the nearest chair. "You've been unconscious for three weeks. After you killed Malfoy and Voldemort, you went into a coma. We brought you back here and healed your body, but you wouldn't wake up."

A fresh tear ran down her cheek, a stark contrast to her bright smile. "The convulsions started shortly afterwards. At first, there would only be a couple a day, but then they started to grow in frequency.

"You were dying, and we couldn't stop it; we didn't even know what spell you had used."

"Ahh, yeah, about that," Harry looked a little embarrassed. "It was a gift from Pettigrew, I memorised it and destroyed the paper."

Hermione smacked his hand lightly. "We can discuss that later. Anyway, we knew you were dying, so we all came to say goodbye while you were still breathing."

"And then you died," George butted in cheerfully. "It was a splendid death, lots of convulsing and then a sudden silence."

"George," Molly snapped.

"And then I made a comment about the light?" Harry asked, bringing the conversation back on to track.

"Yes. So, why aren't you dead?" Fred asked.

Harry struggled to sit up. "Give us a hand here, mate," he half asked, half told Ron.

Ron nodded and lifted him into a sitting position, plumping his pillow for him.

"Thanks," he grinned. "Feel free to sit down again," he invited his standing audience. "I promise the chairs will stay this time."

There was a general shifting as the large group of people sat down again, almost all of them now wearing large smiles.

"So, it was dark," Harry said, as if that explained everything.

"Potter," Snape growled, rolling his eyes.

"You're saying that doesn't explain everything?" he asked.

Snape, and pretty much everyone else, nodded in agreement. Luna didn't. She looked like it was the most perfect of all explanations, and that it was now time for a snack. He decided then that he really liked that girl.

"Okay, after the younger Malfoy sent us to see Voldemort and the Death Eaters... by the way, where is the little toe rag? I really want a quiet word or eight with him."

"He's running," Ginny smirked, entering the conversation. He couldn't help notice the brightness of her eyes. "He was seen by a lot of people casting the spell, and with you then killing his father and Voldemort; he worked out that you might want a word with him, so he started running."

"Now that sounds like a fun sport for the summer," Harry said enthusiastically. "Anyone up for a ferret hunt when school finishes? I'll even put up a thousand galleon prize for anyone who catches him."

"If you put that in the Prophet," Neville said, sounding very amused, "He'd have the whole country looking for him."

"I'd hope so," Harry said, absently buffing his nails on his hospital gown. "It will be interesting to see what happens when he loses the Malfoy fortune for being scum, and then gets sent to Azkaban."

"Come on, Harry," Charlie interrupted. "Be fair."

"In what way?"

"Give us a chance first," the dragon trainer grinned. "Let family search for him before you get the country involved."

"Four weeks?" Harry offered.

"Deal," Bill agreed. "No one messes with our family."

McGonagall coughed loudly. "Could we get back to your miraculous recovery?" she asked pointedly.

"Oh, yeah, right. Sorry. So, after killing Lucius, who, by the way, did at least have some honour, I turned to He-Who-Is-Now-Pushing-Up-Daisies, and cast the spell. It was supposed to sever his connection to life completely. Unfortunately, it also meant severing *my* connection to life, to ensure he didn't use me to hang around. Again.

"Obviously, weirdness happened, and it went dark.

"I started to relive the fight, slowly at first, but it seemed to get faster. Not that I had much of a frame of reference for time.

"Finally, I watched the battle from a different perspective. I saw Lucius' spirit descending into the earth, and then saw a bright light completely destroy Voldemort's. Which was nice.

"Out of this bright light, stepped a few of the people Voldemort had killed – or arranged to kill – and they thanked me. They then vanished, and I came back here.

"Not that I had any clue I was dead, but did you all really expect the Boy-Who-Lived to die in his bed?"

Hermione smiled and embraced him again. "Not at all, Harry," she sniffed.

Ron lightly pushed Hermione out of the way and did the same. "Damn right," he agreed. "Still, was a bit of a shock, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't do it again."

Harry grinned and hugged Ron back. "I'll try my very best not to. Believe me; I've had enough of the dark for some time."

His explanation over, he was subjected to a series of enthusiastic hugs and personal welcome backs from nearly everyone in the room – Snape having slipped out as soon as he could.

It was hard for Harry to judge who gave him the most bone-crushing hug – Hagrid or Mrs Weasley. He felt that Mrs Weasley probably won by a cracked rib.

He particularly enjoyed Ginny's tight hug. It was something he was going to have to work on making a lot more permanent.

Finally, he was alone with Ron and Hermione.

"Can you shut the bloody door?" he asked.

"Sure," Ron grinned. He stood and closed the door tightly.

"Finally," Harry groaned. "Alone. Bloody hell, you'd think I'd been raised from the dead or something."

"You had," Hermione reminded him.

"Oh yeah, right. So, what have I missed?"

"Most of the Wizarding world had a party to end all parties," Ron grinned. "Of course, we've not been partying, but now that you're back, I think we can have one."

"As long as there's no stupid guest of honour stuff," Harry agreed. "We should have one here."

"The press are going to want to speak to you, Harry," Hermione pointed out.

Harry groaned. "I'll do an interview with Luna's dad, but that's it. The Prophet can go shove itself into somewhere dank and mouldy."

"Harry!" Hermione chided.

He exchanged a grin with Ron. "So, you two are still together, right?"

They both nodded.

"Excellent. But that does kinda bring up my next point."

"Which is?"

"If there's going to be a massive party, and by the way, we're going to organise it, I'm going to need a girlfriend for support, dancing, and hopefully, the occasional snog."

"Wait one second," Hermione interrupted. "Before we move on to your love life, what do you mean, we're going to organise the party?"

"It's lack of love life," Harry corrected fastidiously. "And by organise, I mean, we badger Albus into letting us have the Great Hall, we control the guest list, we invite the people to do the music."

"We organise the fire whiskey and Butterbeer," Ron added.

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "It means we can all have a damn good time without worrying about the press, politicians, and other people I don't know."

"Apart from the fire whiskey," Hermione said, glaring at Ron. "I do think that is a good idea."

"Excellent," Harry smiled. "Oh, and we don't let the twins anywhere near the guest list. They'd be selling invites before we could blink."

"So, about your lack of love life," Ron said, bringing the conversation back on track. "Do you have anyone in mind, or should I stick my head out the door, shout, 'Harry wants a girlfriend,' and try and avoid getting caught in the stampede?"

"You'd do that for me?" Harry asked, playacting a sniff.

"Of course," Ron grinned. "What else are friends for?"

"Well, I do have someone in mind." Absently, he shifted a little nearer Hermione. He wasn't sure how Ron would take his next statement.

"Ginny?" Ron said his tone one of that of a person who was guessing.

"Errr, yeah," Harry said and mentally prepared some spells.

"Alright!" Ron yelled. "You owe me a galleon," he said to Hermione.

"Ron, you're not a very good winner," Hermione sniffed. "And a good boyfriend wouldn't demand money."

Ron smirked. "Who said you had to pay in money?" he purred.

"My eyes!" Harry called out, covering his own. "Bad image, bad image. Make it stop!"

"You're the one who's talking about snogging my sister," Ron pointed out. "So, if anyone should be making that sort of fuss, it's me."

"Damn it, Hermione," Harry complained. "You've gone and taught him logic. How am I supposed to win an argument now?"

“Carefully,” Hermione smiled. “Can I ask a serious question?”

“Boxers.”

“Not that,” Hermione groaned. “Why are you so cheerful?”

“Oh, that,” Harry nodded, before turning serious. “When I was unconscious, I had the time to deal with a lot of my issues alone, and now that I know that the people who have died are in heaven and are happy, I can get on with my own life.”

Hermione nodded and hugged him again.

“So,” Harry said suddenly, frowning. “Exactly why do you owe Ron a galleon about me wanting to date Ginny?”

“I thought you’d not want to date anyone till we left school,” she replied. “And I would have won, if Draco hadn’t interfered early.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Harry laughed. “So, I’ll ask her out and hope that she says yes. In the mean time, I want to get the hell outta here.”

“Ahh, yeah, about that,” Ron said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“What?”

“You might want to think about moving in to the Room of Requirement – you’re a bit of a hero in the school.”

“Bugger,” Harry groaned. “Okay, can you go get my cloak while I get Madam Pomfrey in here to prove that I’m alive and healthy and get dressed?”

“I’ll do it,” Hermione offered. “I’ll leave you two together.”

“Thanks, love,” Ron said with a smile.

“Yeah,” Harry echoed.

As the unruly-haired brunette left the room, Harry turned to Ron. “Happy?”

“With her?”

“Yeah.”

“More than I ever thought,” Ron said honestly. “It’s always the quiet ones, if you know what I mean.”

Harry laughed and groaned at the same time. “I don’t want to know, honest!”

“Sure you do,” Ron said, as he opened the door and called in the nurse.

It was no surprise that Harry, still being in his bed, didn’t notice the tip of the extendable ear that was poking out under the door.

The red-haired witch, who was listening in, turned and walked away slowly.

Harry Potter wanted to date her.

She smiled happily – *it was about bloody time* . Although, there was still the matter of him ignoring her for so many bloody years.

She wouldn’t be a Weasley if she let him get away with that, would she?

She’d make him suffer a little bit, and then allow him to take her to the party – and have a word about his attitude to snogging. An ‘occasional snog’ was not enough, there was going to have to be a lot more than that.

She skipped down the hall merrily, mentally deciding what to do.

Harry prowled around the Room of Requirement. He’d been awake for a day now – without sleep – he didn’t need it at the moment. Dumbledore had agreed to his idea of a party, on the sole condition that he was invited.

The guest list was slowly growing, as he realised just how many people he was friendly with – and their partners and families had to be invited too. It was shaping up to be a killer party, and he’d taken great pleasure in refusing invites to Fudge.

“Hi, Harry,” Ginny said, as she entered the room.

“Hi, Ginny,” Harry responded, suddenly feeling nervous. “Want a drink?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” Ginny replied, dropping into a seat.

She had obviously just come from Quidditch practice, as her hair was wild behind her, and her cheeks were flushed.

I've been out of the loop for a bit," he said, perching himself on the edge of his chair. "Are you dating anyone at the moment?" He didn't want to just come out and make a fool of himself, if she was dating someone else. Of course, if she was, he was going to be pretty upset anyway.

She shook her head, her eyes alight. "Nope, but there is someone I'm getting close to," she confided.

"Really?" he asked, feeling a lead weight settle into his stomach. Their friendship was such that this conversation wasn't out of place.

"Oh, yeah," she sighed breathily. "He's a fantastic Quidditch player, is fearless, and has the most amazing eyes."

If there was one thing he knew about himself, it was that he was both a good Quidditch player, and he'd had a few compliments on his eyes. "Oh?" he asked, his mouth going dry with anticipation.

"Yeah," Ginny sighed dreamily, leaning back in the chair. "Of course, the fact that he no longer goes to Hogwarts makes it difficult."

Harry felt like he had been kicked in the stomach by a rampaging Hippogriff. "Who is he?" he asked, struggling to keep his voice lightly interested.

"Oliver," Ginny sighed dreamily. "All that obsession and focus really makes a girl feel special."

"Oliver Wood?" Harry asked, slowly. Something wasn't right here.

"Yep," Ginny agreed. "We started talking last year, and met up in the summer."

Harry nodded, slowly. "Good news, then," he said stiffly. "As Oliver is already on the guest list, the invites are all finished."

"Oh, cool," Ginny smiled, bouncing to her feet. "I'll see you later, alright Harry?"

"Sure," Harry nodded, pride forcing him to act normally. "Later."

Ginny walked out of the door and smirked to himself. She'd give him twenty four hours, before admitting that she had lied about Oliver. The look on his face was suitable punishment for the years he had put her through.

Harry frowned softly and picked up a piece of parchment in front of him.

Harry,

First off, Denise and I want to thank you for defeating Voldemort. I always knew you were special, and you've proved it. But now that you have defeated him, have you thought about the future? I've going to have an opening next year for a Seeker, and you'd be perfect. It would be great to play with you again.

Thanks for inviting us to the party; all of our friends are really jealous. Can you do us one favour though? Make sure there are some non-alcoholic drinks available. This isn't public knowledge, but I'm going to be a daddy. Denise is pregnant! We got engaged last summer – in secret – and we're now going to get married in a few months time. I can't believe I'm settling down already.

We'll see you on Saturday – I can't wait to introduce you to Denise.

With Regards,

Oliver

P.S. I meant it about the Quidditch!

The letter seemed perfectly straight forward, and if there was one thing he was sure of, it was that Oliver wouldn't cheat on his fiancé.

So why would Ginny lie to him ?

He frowned and sat down, rerunning through the conversation, and came to an uncomfortable conclusion. Ginny had known beforehand what he was going to say, and that she had come prepared for it. But he still didn't know why.

If she didn't want to date him, she could have just said so – making up a boyfriend seemed silly and pointless. Especially when the person in question was going to be coming to the party anyway.

Her eyes had held that familiar Weasley glint – of someone doing something they shouldn't be.

He sighed; he really didn't know enough about girls to gain any more insight, so he was going to have to brave the great outdoors.

He was loathe to do so; the first time he had stepped into public, he had ended up running for his life from a crowd of screaming second years. Albus had been no help at all, pointing out that Harry **was** a hero.

He pulled on his invisibility cloak and slipped out of the door, heading towards the Gryffindor common room. He waited outside for a few minutes, till a first year opened it up, allowing him to slip in secretly.

Ron and Hermione were in the corner, alone, so he sneaked over to them. "Guys," he whispered, "Don't jump." He was well aware that saying that would make them jump – and sure enough, it did.

"Harry!" Hermione whispered. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to you both; can you come back to the Room of Requirement?"

Hermione silently packed away their books and took Ron's hand, both of them walking out of the Common Room.

"You know, you both look cute like that," Harry whispered, amused.

He had to dodge back from an elbow that would have caught him in a place that he didn't think Ron would want Hermione touching – and that was disregarding his own feelings on the matter.

Once inside the Room of Requirement, which had obediently remodelled itself back to the large bedroom he'd been using for the last few days, he threw off his cloak and collapsed on the bed.

"So, what's the emergency?" Ron asked, dropping into a chair and pulling Hermione on to his lap.

"I invited Ginny up here to ask her out," Harry said.

"Cool!" Ron exclaimed happily.

"I asked her if she was dating anyone else first, you know, to be safe."

"She's not," Hermione agreed with a smile.

"She said she was in love with Oliver Wood and that they had met last summer and are having a long distance relationship."

There was a complete silence from Ron and Hermione.

Harry stared at the ceiling, and realised that there were twenty four tiles across, and twenty seven tiles down. 'That's two times twenty four,' he thought to himself, waiting for them to respond. 'Then add a zero to that. Now twenty four times seven, which is... 168, add the 480 from earlier, and we have... 648 tiles.'

"I'm sorry," Hermione said slowly. "Did you just say that Ginny is dating Oliver Wood?"

"No," Harry said. "Did you know that there are 648 tiles on the ceiling?"

Hermione blinked and looked up, and then nodded half a second later. "She's not dating Oliver?"

"No," Harry agreed again. "She said she was in love with him, and that they had met over the summer."

"So they're dating?" Hermione said again.

"No."

"Gah! Explain!" Hermione groaned in frustration.

Harry rolled off the bed, and picked up Oliver's letter, and handed it to them.

"Cool!" Ron said, as he read the first bit. "Are you going to play for them?"

"Ron!" Hermione sighed, elbowing her boyfriend firmly. "That's not important right now."

"Oh, yeah, right."

"What on earth is she playing at?" Hermione demanded, when she got to the bottom.

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "She couldn't have met up with him last summer anyway – she wasn't allowed out alone as it was."

"I didn't know that," Harry sighed. "I spent too much time at Grimmauld Place alone."

"So, any idea exactly why she would tell me that?"

"Nope," Ron said, fidgeting under Hermione. "But I'm going to have a word with my darling sister."

"No, you're not," Hermione contradicted, settling herself down firmly in his lap. "You're about as subtle as a Hippogriff in Madam Puddifoot's."

"Now that," Harry said admiringly, "is an analogy to savour. Imagine the improvements Buckbeak could make."

Ron laughed. "True." Before the smile dropped off his face. "Harry," he said, seriously, "was Ginny in 'pranking' mode?"

Harry nodded.

Ron groaned and shook his head. "Stupid girl," he muttered.

"Ron?" Harry and Hermione asked together.

"Look, just let me deal with it, okay?"

Harry and Hermione shook their heads.

"You being insightful makes me nervous," Harry explained. "I keep having to look around to check that Voldemort isn't back."

"She's my sister; I know what she's thinking. Let me have a quiet chat with her and everything will be okay, I promise."

"What is she thinking?" Hermione asked.

"You don't want to know," Ron groaned.

"I think we do," Harry said with a smile.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Ron said softly. "She's trying to put you through a little of what she went through."

"But..." Harry said, his mind going blank as a feeling of coldness settled around his stomach.

"You didn't know any better," Hermione finished off slowly and jumped to her feet.

"Oh, no you don't," Ron said, grabbing her. "I will talk to my sister."

"But..."

"No, Hermione. I'm family; it has to be me."

Harry hardly paid attention to them, his mind locked in the loop caused by the idea that Ginny would deliberately hurt him emotionally.

"I'll deal with it," Ron said, resting his hand on Harry's shoulder.

Harry nodded absently.

Ron walked into the Gryffindor Common Room, and immediately spotted his sister. It was one of the good things about being a Weasley, you could always find each other in a crowd.

He walked over to her – she'd obviously showered recently, and lightly grabbed her arm. "Come with me," he growled.

"No," Ginny replied. "Let go."

"Not this time," Ron said, trying to keep his voice down. "At the moment, I'm trying very hard not to do everything I can to make sure you don't get near Harry again, never mind have a relationship with him."

"What?"

"We are going to talk, now!"

Ginny nodded, and followed him obediently into the boys' room.

"Sit," Ron said, pointing at Harry's unused bed.

Ron paced around the room and then slammed the door shut, before walking around the room to make sure that no one else was around.

He turned to look at his sister, took in her pale face, and sighed. He really needed to control his temper over this. It was the first time in memory that he had volunteered to have an emotional conversation with anyone, and he had to get it right. The problem was that no one else could do it. If Hermione tried and it went badly, it could cause all sorts of complications in their friendship, and no one else could know about it.

The problem he had was that he had no idea how to address the issue, especially not when he was still mad at her for hurting his friend. Ginny might be his sister, but Harry was his brother, in a way that went beyond mere blood. They had been there for each other, forgiven each other, and saved each other's life. He knew, without doubt, that Harry would do anything for him, and the very least he could try and do was rescue this from the mess it was becoming.

"What happens when a ten year old does accidental magic?" he asked softly.

"What?" Ginny replied, looking blank.

"Answer the question, Gin," he replied, sitting on the edge of his bed.

"Well, they get told not to do it again, and that's about it."

"Why aren't they put into prison or expelled from junior school?"

"Because they don't know any better."

Ron nodded, pleased she had come to that conclusion. "So why are you punishing Harry for something that he didn't know any better?"

“What!?”

He sighed and stared at his trainers. “Did you know that Harry has been inviting pretty much everyone he is friendly with to this party?”

“Yeah?”

“Including Oliver Wood. Who is coming. Along with his pregnant fiancé.”

Ginny went even paler. “Oh, no!”

“So,” he continued, determined to just get it out now. “Harry came and asked us why you’d make up such a silly lie – as he couldn’t work it out.”

Ginny looked at him, her eyes wider than he could remember seeing them.

“Right now, he’s wondering why you would deliberately hurt him.”

“But it was only supposed to be fun,” Ginny said. “Teach him a lesson for ignoring me for years, and then let him off the hook, and we could both be happy.”

“He learned that lesson when we talked to him about it, and he didn’t know better. He didn’t owe you anything, he still doesn’t. He doesn’t owe anyone anything, not after all he’s been through. You’re a Weasley, Gin, and I know your heart’s in the right place, but you really mucked this one up.

“Yeah, he might have ignored you, but I was doing the same – and as much as you wanted it differently, he wasn’t thinking – ‘Oh look, there’s Ginny, she’s in love with me, I’ll ignore her feelings and moon over Cho.’ He thought, ‘Oh, look, Cho’s incredibly pretty.’

“It had nothing to do with you. It never did.”

“But…”

“There are no buts, Ginny. I saw the Extendable Ear; I was pretty sure you still had feelings for him and figured it would be a good way for you to make it easy for him. We both know how much trouble he has opening up – although he has been better since he died.

“Right now, he’s downstairs wondering why the hell you would want to deliberately hurt him – and that’s the difference, Gin. He hurt you, but he didn’t know any better, and he didn’t even know he was doing it. You hurt him, and you did it on purpose – even if you didn’t mean it like that.”

He looked across at his sister and sighed sadly as he saw the tears running down her face.

“Go to him, Ginny; explain, apologise, whatever it takes. But this is your last chance; I won’t let you hurt him again. Sister or not.”

Ginny nodded slowly, and then walked over and hugged him tightly.

“Thank you,” she whispered softly.

He smiled gently at her, seeing the small girl he had grown up with. Perhaps this growing up business wasn’t as bad as he had feared. He had Hermione, he had Harry, and he had Ginny. It had a nice balance to it, and with Voldemort dead, Draco in hiding awaiting a summer sport; there was no reason why they couldn’t spend the rest of their lives like this.

All he had to do now was not be freaked when he saw Harry and Ginny kissing.

Ginny gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and released him. He watched as she took a deep breath and gathered herself, straightening her shoulders.

They were going to get past this, he knew that now. And if not, he’d take Harry to one side, and have a man to man talk with him – even if Harry was scarily powerful, an incredible fighter, and a vicious git if you got on his bad side, this was his sister he was talking about!

Ginny left the room, hurrying down, and he followed her, realising he would need to take Hermione out of the way. If he knew his clever girlfriend, and he was pretty sure he did, she would have been pointing out Ginny’s side of things to Harry.

Ginny entered the Room of Requirement in a hurry, and he followed her in. Harry was sitting, staring out the window, Hermione curled up near him. If it had been any other boy, he would have been insanely jealous, but this was Harry and Hermione. There was a bond between the three of them that they never talked about, but acknowledged all the same. It made him realise that he was the luckiest guy in the world.

He lightly pulled Hermione up and out of the way.

“Well?” she asked.

“I think I got through to her,” he said proudly.

“Well done,” she praised him, and he suddenly felt ten feet tall.

He might not break curses, fight dragons, be a rising star in the Ministry, or have a wildly successful joke shop, but he did have great friends, grades that would see him graduate second only to Percy, and a beautiful girlfriend who loved him as much as he loved her.

All it needed now was for his sister to repair the mistake she had made, and life would be good.

"She didn't mean it like that," Hermione said softly.

"Like what?" he asked.

Hermione sighed, "She probably thought it wasn't serious, you know? Just give you a bit of payback for what she went through."

"I didn't purposefully set out to hurt her, Hermione."

"I know. And I think she does as well."

"Then why?"

Hermione paused, and then lapsed into silence. "She's a teenager, she didn't think it through."

"That's what worries me," Harry said softly. "I'm not a teenager any more. I've killed, Hermione, twice. I saw myself do it so many times when I was unconscious. I know what anger is, I know what fear is, and I know what it's like to be responsible for so many people's deaths."

"It's not what she did, regardless of why; it's that she did it. It's a maturity level. I have it, you have it, and even Ron has it now. What we did that day changed us; it forced us to grow up."

Hermione nodded. "We're all different. Ron and I have..." she shrugged expressively.

"I guessed," Harry smiled. "I do get to be Best Man, right?"

She reached over and hugged him. "Of course! Not that he's asked yet."

"He will," Harry replied confidently. "It's not the right time yet."

"No," Hermione agreed. "It's not. What are you going to do about Ginny?"

"I don't know," Harry sighed. "Do I really love her? I would have answered yes this morning, but now, I'm not sure."

"Look into your heart, Harry, and ask yourself what you see. You can get around this. It was a mistake; it happens. Don't stop yourself from what you want because of it – and you said it yourself, she hasn't been through what we have. She's still growing up, and you have a chance of helping her do that."

Harry smiled slowly and reached out and pulled her into a hug.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome," she said, curling up next to him on the couch.

"Hi," Ginny said nervously.

He looked her up and down and slowly realised that Hermione was right. She hadn't meant to hurt him like that.

"Ginny," he nodded solemnly.

She worried her lower lip between her teeth, and he suddenly wanted to kiss it – kiss her.

She looked him straight in the eye and said simply, "I'm sorry."

He looked back at her, holding back the smile that was trying to form. The apology was enough for him to stop worrying. It was a direct adult apology, and just what he wanted.

He didn't want her to change – while this had been a little badly thought out, it was her sense of mischief that had been one of the things that had attracted him to her in the first place.

And he'd probably overreacted a little as well.

"There's only one thing I want from you," he said softly.

"What?"

He smiled slowly and opened his arms.

"You."

She smiled, the smile he had dreamed about, and a second later, she was in his arms. He closed them, trapping her in, and as the smell of her hair reached his nose, and the feel of her alternately Quidditch-hard and girl-soft body ran up and down his body, he decided to never let go.

He felt her move and looked down, to be caught as she raised her face and kissed him.

He only had time for one more conscious thought as he fell back on to the couch, bringing her on top of him.

It was light.