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Alone

Part 1

Please note: This is a sequel story to All Night Long.

“Harry?” Kingsley Shacklebolt asked as he approached the sun bathing form carefully.

“Hmm?” Harry replied, not moving from his relaxed position.

Kingsley sat down next to him. “I’ve got a favour to ask,” he said bluntly.

Harry had told Kingsley many times that he preferred brevity to polite rambling, and was pleased that the Auror had listened.

“Really?” Harry asked dryly. “The chief Auror hasn’t just stopped by to enquire about my health?”

“You look sickeningly healthy, considering you’re a playboy these days.”

Harry raised one eyebrow so that it was visible over his sunglasses. “Sticks and stones, Kingsley,” he said evenly.

Kingsley smiled. “My Aurors are getting fat and lazy,” he explained. “With you killing most of the Death Eaters and scaring the others into deep hiding, they’ve not got that much to do, so they sit around a lot and play cards.”

“And the problem is?”

“They wiped me out playing poker the other night,” the Auror sighed. “It’s a sign that they’re spending too much time waiting for something to happen. This bloody peace you’ve managed to impose is bad for us.”

“Would you like me to resurrect Voldemort for you?”

“Can you do that?” Kingsley asked, looking at Harry slowly, an expression of nervousness on his face.

“I’ve got no idea,” Harry grinned. “Probably, though. A bit of Necromancy here and there, a few charms, a bit of power, and hey presto, one psychotic Dark Lord for your Aurors to get killed by.”

“If you don’t mind,” Kingsley drawled, “I’ll pass.”

“Not at all. What do you want me to do?”

“I was thinking of a day of fun and games.” Kingsley’s grin was positively evil. “You versus my

best Aurors. I'll be the judge, obviously."

"What sort of games?" Harry asked warily.

"Capture the flag. In the morning, they have to defend while you attack, and in the afternoon, it's reversed."

"Me? Against twenty? Thirty? Aurors? Doesn't seem very fair to me..."

"I know, but that's the maximum I can spare for the day."

"I meant fair to me," Harry clarified.

Kingsley laughed and then darted forward, throwing a punch at Harry's face.

Harry's hands shot up, catching the Auror's wrist. He slid off the sun bed and dropped to the floor, pulling Kingsley off balance. A quick kick finished the job.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked, as he looked down at the prone Auror before him. The Auror was face down, with his right arm held painfully behind him in Harry's unrelenting grip.

"Proving a point," Kingsley gasped through the pain. "Could you release me?"

Harry sighed and did, walking over to a side table and poured out two drinks of fresh cold water.

"Here," he said, passing one to Kingsley.

"Thanks," the Auror replied, as he stopped rubbing his shoulder. "How many people do you think can do that to me?"

Harry shrugged as he sat back down on his sun bed.

"Hardly any," Kingsley continued. "So you've still got the skills, Harry, and you're definitely still in shape. I need someone who can scare my Aurors into realising that they might have it easy now, but that's no reason to get complacent."

"What's in it for me?" Harry asked.

"A day of fun and interest," Kingsley offered. "Don't tell me that you're not looking for a challenge."

"I've had all the challenges I need," Harry reminded him.

"Because I'm asking as a friend?" Kingsley tried.

"Okay," Harry said.

"What?"

“I said okay.”

“Just like that?”

“You asked for a favour; I owe you one for the Veritaserum you found for me to use on Malfoy. I’m paying you back”

“Wait a second,” Kingsley protested. “I did that to pay you back; you can’t say you owe me for that.”

“You’re talking yourself out of help here,” Harry pointed out.

“Wait, I know, damn it,” he said. “Not the point though.”

“That’s what I like about you,” Harry laughed. “You’re too honest for your own good.”

Kingsley grumbled under his breath. “Look, what do you want for a day of your time where you can act as grumpy as you like, scare the hell out of a bunch of people who are riding on your coat tails, and remind those of us who count, that as bad as we think we are, you are the baddest mother-fucker on the planet?”

Harry laughed and shook his head slowly. “Damn it, I knew that introducing you to Muggle movies would be a bad idea.”

“Don’t be knocking Samuel,” Kingsley said seriously. “Them’s fighting words.”

“You just like him because you have the same hair cut,” Harry grinned.

“And that he’s a great actor,” Kingsley said. “Did I ever tell you about the time I used that speech from Pulp Fiction to scare that Goblin?”

“Seventeen times,” Harry said instantly.

“It’s not that many,” Kingsley protested.

“It is,” Harry said firmly. “I’d consider you not telling that story ever again as a price, but not even I am that heartless. Okay, at the next Weasley party, you cook.”

“Barbeque?” Kingsley asked.

“Absolutely!”

“Deal,” Kingsley said excitedly.

“When do you want this done?” Harry asked, a smile playing on his lips.

“A week Saturday?”

“Fine by me.”

“Cool. Thanks Harry. I’ll be in touch next weekend when I have all the details worked out.”

Harry nodded and settled back down. “See you next week.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Kingsley said seriously, before turning and walking out of the garden.

As soon as he was gone, Harry jumped to his feet and looked at his watch. Ron and Hermione would be coming home from their respective jobs shortly, and he now had a reason to talk to them.

He walked inside and pulled on a shirt to go with his shorts and thrust his feet carelessly into some trainers. On his fireplace, were two coloured jewels, a ruby and a diamond, which showed that the private Floo between his house, Ron’s, and Hermione’s were all open.

He grabbed some Floo powder and threw it in the fire, saying the private name for Ron’s flat. It had been a bit of an investment for him to set it up, but it allowed him the freedom to visit his friends whenever he liked it – and be visited by them – without anyone else knowing about it.

He tumbled out of the Floo, and brushed himself off. Despite everything, he still hadn’t mastered the art of travelling by that particular method.

“Hi Harry,” Ron’s obviously pregnant wife said, walking over to give him a quick kiss.

“How’s Harry Junior?” he asked with a grin.

“Harry Potter!” Sumi said, stamping her foot with frustration. “First, we don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl, and second, we are not naming our child Harry!”

“Why not?” Harry grinned. “It’s a perfectly serviceable name.”

“Serviceable is not a good start,” Sumi muttered darkly.

When she had first moved to the country with Ron, her English had been passable, and she had been very shy with it. Hermione had listened to her for thirty minutes before deciding to do something about it. The result was a Sumi who now spoke perfect English, and a friendship between the two women that was as deep as it was genuine.

“I don’t see why not,” Harry protested.

Sumi suddenly stopped and smirked at him. “Would you like your first godchild to have the same common name as everyone else?”

“Wait, godchild?” Harry asked, “and what do you mean, common?”

“Common, as there has been a rash of children named Harry after you,” Sumi said smugly. “If

you'd read the Prophet recently you'd know that."

"Poor kids," Harry sighed. "And godchild?"

"Do you think we would ask anyone else, mate?" Ron said with a grin as he walked into the kitchen and embraced his wife.

"Bloody Hermione's been teaching her how to handle me," Harry complained.

"Of course she has," Ron agreed. "I asked her to. Can't have her in awe of you, can we."

Harry shot him a foul look. "I'm honoured," he said solemnly. "But just so you know, I'm going to spoil the kid rotten."

Ron and Sumi laughed. "You think we hadn't thought about that?" Sumi asked. "You need a woman, Harry."

"And where am I going to find one that likes me, not Harry Potter?" Harry sighed.

"Not in that large house you hide in all day."

"Ron, she's picking on me," Harry protested.

"I know," Ron agreed. "As we both know you won't curse a pregnant woman, and as she's saying things I'm scared to, I'm going to let her run with it."

"Traitor," Harry grumbled.

"And about to be a father," Ron grinned. "And much as I love you, Harry, the idea of making more children is better than that."

Harry reached behind him and threw a pillow at Ron. "Too much information!"

"How else do you think babies are made?" Ron asked with a grin, reaching into the fridge for a couple of Butterbeers and a glass of orange juice. He gave the juice to his wife and plonked a Butterbeer in front of Harry, before they moved into the living room.

"Well," Harry smirked. "Daddy masturbates into a cup and some clever Muggles concentrate the sperm, using the world's largest eye-dropper, to impregnate one of Mummy's eggs."

"Only if your name is Malfoy," Ron laughed. "You never did tell me how you felt when they found that Malfoy wasn't completely sterile."

Harry smiled and settled down comfortably on their leather couch, taking a swig of the Butterbeer. "I very nearly kissed the doctor – she was attractive as well – in celebration. And just think," he said with an evil grin, "for several weeks, Malfoy really was a wanker."

Ron threw his head back and roared with laughter.

“Why were you going to help them?” Sumi asked. “Ron told me what happened, and what happened at school.”

Harry sighed and looked down, gathering his thoughts. “I tried to do it for the person I wanted to be, rather than the person I was. But as we got to America, I was starting to give some very serious thoughts to pulling out. The idea of someone else carrying and raising my own child started to seem very wrong, even if I was just being a donor. It hadn’t even occurred to me that the magic they use for a diagnosis wasn’t as good as the stuff the Muggles use. Still, the look of shock and horror on Cho’s face was more than enough,” he finished with a grin.

“I still hate her,” Ron sighed. “I wouldn’t ever forgive her for that.”

Harry shrugged. “I could hate her, but hate leads to suffering, suffering leads to anger, and anger leads to the Dark Side,” he intoned.

Ron groaned. “Do you and Kingsley do anything else but watch Muggle films?”

“Every Wednesday night,” Harry smiled. “We get a pizza, a couple of movies, and some popcorn. And speaking of Kingsley, he’s volunteered to cook at the next Weasley Party.”

“Really?” Sumi asked. “Does he know what he’s letting himself in for?”

“I think he does,” Harry smiled. “He’s going to barbeque.”

“And what are you doing to get him to do that?” Ron asked. “Because the last time we asked him, he didn’t stop running for a week.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Harry admitted. “Can we get Hermione and Bill as well? It’s not such a fun story that I want to go through it twice.”

“Sure,” Sumi said, getting to her feet.

“I’ll go, you rest, love,” Ron said, jumping to his feet.

“I’m pregnant, not disabled,” Sumi complained to Harry indignantly, with a cute pout.

“He just worries about you,” Harry explained with a smile.

“I know,” she sighed and then smiled. “He is very cute about it, though.”

“How are your parents?”

“Worshipping the very ground you walk on,” she said dryly. “Just how did you arrange for them to have the international Floo network hooked up to their fireplace?”

Harry shrugged. "Charm, bribery, and when that didn't work, the odd threat did the trick."

"Harry!" Sumi protested.

He waved his hand cheerfully. "The guy was refusing because you married Ron, no other reason. I just told him that if he didn't do it, I'd Apparate him into space."

"Can you even do that?"

"Of course not," Harry smirked. "But everyone expects the great Harry Potter to have more magic than the Wizengamot put together."

"You are powerful, though."

"A bit," Harry agreed. "But Voldemort was a lot more powerful than I'll ever be. I have no wish to sell my soul for that sort of thing."

"A fact we are all grateful for," Hermione said dryly as she walked into the living room and hugged Sumi first, and then Harry.

"So I'm relegated to second in the hug stakes as well?" Harry teased.

"When you are pregnant," Hermione smiled, "you'll get hugged first."

"What's he whining about?" her husband asked as he walked in.

"Harry getting hugged after Sumi," Hermione explained.

"In that case," Bill said with a grin, and he jumped onto Harry's lap.

"Get off me, you lummoX," Harry groaned under the weight of the large curse breaker.

"Don't you love me anymore?" Bill pouted.

"What do you mean, anymore?" Harry asked, as he stood and carried Bill over to Hermione. "Yours, I believe."

"Thank you," Hermione said solemnly. "So why are we here?"

Harry sat back down on the couch and watched as his friends took up a couch each. There was a distinct space next to him, which was left for him to eventually bring a partner to the group. It was unspoken and always had been since they had started meeting like this.

"Kingsley's worried about his Aurors. They're starting to get too good at poker for his liking."

"What does that have to do with you?" Sumi asked, frowning.

"He thinks that their poker skills mean that they are growing complacent," he explained. "So he's

arranging a training day for them.”

“And?” Hermione demanded.

“Me versus them,” Harry finished.

“He wants you to take on all his Aurors at once?” Hermione stated coldly, her eyes flashing.

“No, of course not,” Harry said.

“Good, don’t tease me like that,” she said, shooting a small smile at him.

“It’s only his thirty best.”

“Harry James Potter!” Hermione and Sumi shouted together.

There was a silence, before Harry’s lip twitched. He tried as hard as he could to stop it, but he couldn’t. He burst out into laughter, an action that Ron and Bill copied a second later.

“Do you think this is funny, Ron?” Sumi asked dangerously.

“No, dear,” Ron said, once he had regained his breath, his face turning red as he tried to control the laughter.

“I do,” Harry said, deliberately drawing the focus onto him. He didn’t want his two male friends to get into trouble because of him.

The two women turned and glared at him, a glare that was about as effective as a two year old running the London Marathon.

“If you’ve finished glaring?” Harry asked.

“You need a girlfriend,” Hermione complained.

“I was saying just that earlier,” Sumi agreed.

“As I haven’t got one and am pretty happy with that,” Harry smiled, “how about we move on to what I wanted to discuss with you guys? Basically, it’s going to be two games of capture the flag, one in the morning where I capture theirs, and one in the afternoon where they try and capture mine.”

“Confident, are we, Harry?” Bill asked.

Harry smirked. “Of course I am. After all, backing me up I have,” and he pointed at Bill, “one of the best curse breakers in the world, the smartest witch,” he pointed at Hermione, before moving on to Ron, “a great tactician, and someone who can move so quietly even I have trouble tracking her,” he finished by pointing by pointing at Sumi. “So I’m making a request: a day or two of your

time to help me out over the next few weeks.”

“Harry,” Hermione said slowly. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because Kingsley promised to cook at the next Weasley party?” Harry offered.

The four people opposite him shook their heads at once and just stared silently at him.

“All right,” Harry sighed. “Because the last thing the Wizarding World needs is Aurors who can’t do the job. Kingsley’s right, complacency will only allow someone else to rise up in Voldemort’s place, and when that happens a lot of soft Aurors are going to die. There’s also an element of personal pride involved. The best of the lot are ex-DA members, and I think I need to remind them exactly why we trained so hard.”

Hermione settled back and smiled warmly at him. “Now if you’d just said that some time ago, we wouldn’t have had to go through this.”

“But where’s the fun in that?” Harry asked.

Sumi threw a pillow at him – Harry caught it cleanly and instantly returned it at a higher speed into Ron’s face.

“Hey!” Ron complained.

“Sorry,” Harry shrugged. “You said yourself, I’d never hit a pregnant woman.”

Ron just glared at him for a second.

“So, are you going to help me out?”

“When is it?” Bill asked.

“A week Saturday.”

“That doesn’t leave much time,” Ron pointed out.

Harry smiled slightly. “It’s more time than we had to prepare for the final battle,” he said softly. “And this time, we have two more people.”

“Damn right,” Bill agreed.

“Okay,” Hermione nodded. “You’re lucky that it’s the summer holidays and I don’t have class, so Sumi and I can help you every day.”

Sumi nodded her agreement enthusiastically. “It’s about time I can help pay you back for some of the things you’ve done for me,” she said quietly.

Harry looked a little embarrassed.

“Accept it,” Ron told him dryly. “You do way more than you need to for us, and it’s not often we get the chance to help. But I do have a suggestion.”

“Oh?” Harry asked, pleased that the topic was moving on.

“Why don’t we get the twins in as well?”

Harry opened his mouth and then shut it slowly. He smirked as he let the idea slowly sink into his mind. “I think I like that idea,” he said slowly. “I really do.”

“I almost feel sorry for the Aurors,” Bill said. “And Ginny.”

Harry blinked. “I’d forgotten that she might be there.”

Bill and Ron grinned. “She’s been very proud of her Auror skills,” Ron said slowly. “She hasn’t been pranked in a very long time. Maybe she’s just a little too big for her boots at the moment, forgetting that we’ve all been there as well.”

“Absolutely,” Bill agreed. “Maybe it’s time for our lovely sister to remember that we all have good jobs that we love, and that she isn’t the top of the tree.”

Harry groaned.

“It’s okay Harry,” Ron smirked. “If you can defeat all the Aurors, surely one more won’t be a problem.”

“It’s not her,” Harry explained. “It’s Molly.”

Ron stood and walked over to the normal Floo in the living room. He pulled out some powder and threw it into the fire. “Molly Weasley,” he said.

“Ron?” Molly’s voice replied. “How are you, dear?”

“Are you alone, mum?”

“Your father’s at work. How’s Sumi?”

“She’s fine. I called to ask you a question.”

“Oh?”

“Kingsley’s asked Harry to help remind the Aurors that they are paid to work, not play poker. We’re going to help him be ready to embarrass the lot of them.”

“Including Ginny?” Molly asked.

“That’s what’s causing Harry the problem,” Ron grinned. “He’s scared of your reaction.”

“Stand back, Ron,” Molly said cheerfully, and a second later, she appeared in the room and sat in the spare space next to Harry.

“I think I’m gratified that you’re a little scared of me,” Molly grinned at Harry.

“I think we all still remember your Howlers,” Harry said in explanation.

Molly laughed. “Harry, dear, I love my daughter very much, but recently she seems to have forgotten that both Arthur and I were fighting Voldemort long before she was born. As much as it pains me to admit it, she does need a small dose of humility to remind her that she is as human as the rest of us. We’ve tried to have a chat with her, we all have, but it doesn’t seem to be getting through.”

Harry looked at the one woman he felt was the closest thing to a mother to him, and slowly nodded. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said softly. “Now, what are you five planning for dinner?”

“We haven’t got there yet,” Ron said.

“Right. Harry, take Sumi outside and help her Apparate to the Burrow. The rest of you, into the Floo.”

The five adults found themselves moving before they could even think about protesting.

“So,” Harry said as he finished his meal. “Why haven’t I seen Ginny act like this?”

“It’s a pretty recent thing,” Bill said as he tilted back in his chair. “Well, it’s been there for a year or so now, but not really when you’ve been around. It’s more been little comments here and there, nothing really you can put your finger on.”

“It was just the way she’d look when she’d stop a Fred and George prank – and they’ve been so busy running their business that they’ve not had time to do anything more than token gestures,” Ron continued smoothly. “But when you went to Singapore, it seemed to go up a level or two – as if the Aurors are the only ones in the country good in a fight.”

Harry nodded and yawned. “Speaking of which, I need to go home and get some sleep. I’m still running on Singapore time.”

“Okay, Harry,” Molly said, giving him a hug.

“I’ll see you guys later,” Harry said and jumped into the Floo.

Sumi frowned and looked around the table. “We all agree that he is lonely,” she said. “So why

don't we help him find someone?"

"Never," Hermione said gently, getting there before Ron could. "All through school, Harry was manipulated by Dumbledore into doing what the Professor wanted. It took away all of Harry's choice and forced him into a position he hated."

"Harry hates being manipulated, more so than anything else – even being lied to. While he is in a much better mood these days, the steel is still inside him," Ron continued.

"Ron and I swore that we would never do that to him, no matter how good our intentions. We saw how badly Dumbledore screwed up their relationship, and we love Harry too much to do that. We're his friends, and we're privileged to be so; we're not going to do anything to disrupt that – even if he is unhappy and alone. All we can do is be there for him and support him in any way we can."

Sumi's eyes were wide as she looked at her husband and her closest female friend. "I'm sorry," she said simply. "I didn't know."

"We know," Ron said, pulling her chair next to his so he could hold her. "Not many people do."

They were interrupted by the sound of the Floo from the living room, and a few seconds later, another Weasley sibling entered the house.

"Percy," Molly said with a smile. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Hi, everyone," Percy smiled. "I expected Harry to be here as well."

"He's still on Singapore time," Bill explained.

"Ahh yes, he did a wonderful job over there. Smoothed over the troubles we were having with his normal skill. It's a pity we can't have him full time, but anything is better than nothing."

"Anyway, I'm not staying long, Angelina is waiting for me. I thought I'd bring you a little present."

"Oh?" Molly asked, looking a little surprised.

"I happened to be in Kingsley's office earlier, as I'd heard about a training exercise happening next Saturday," Percy explained as he casually placed a rolled up piece of parchment on the table

"Anyway, I tripped," he said with a completely straight face, "and happened to land on an Extendable Ear, and somehow overheard Kingsley telling Madam Bones that Harry is going to go against the top thirty Aurors in a couple of games."

"Tripped?" Ron snorted.

Percy's face took on a haughty expression. "Absolutely. Even highly trained Aurors can stumble

at times,” he said with the slightest hint of a grin lurking in the corners of his mouth. “As I climbed to my feet, I just happened to place down my Duplication Parchment on top of the map on Kingsley’s desk.”

“Accidentally,” Bill agreed.

Percy drew himself up, so that he was almost standing to attention. “Precisely, William. So, rather than have this useless paper sent to recycling, I thought that I’d let you deal with it. I’m sure you’ll do the right thing.”

“Nothing but,” Hermione smiled.

“Oh, and in completely unrelated news, our sister is one of the Aurors on the course next weekend. I do so hope that some time soon she learns that we also all fought Voldemort, and we can look after ourselves.”

He looked around the room solemnly, then threw them a quick wink and a smile and vanished out the Floo.

“Angelina’s worked wonders on him,” Ron laughed, picking up the parchment his brother had left. “And this is wonderful; we’ll have some tactics for Harry in no time.”

“She has,” Molly agreed. “It’s so good to see that mischievousness back. When he was younger, he was almost as bad as the twins.”

“Almost,” Bill smiled. “But he seemed to calm down when they were born.”

“I bet he felt outnumbered,” Ron mused. “And it was one way to stand out from the crowd.”

“True. I just wish I’d seen his face when Harry let fly on him,” Bill sighed.

Ron and Hermione exchanged a long smile.

“I think it’s safe to tell you the story now,” Hermione said with a soft smile. “Percy’s five inches taller than Harry. And he loomed over Harry and gave him some rather bad advice that went along the lines of...”

“Let me, Hermione,” Ron interrupted, standing. He raised his nose high in the air. “While you have been instrumental in pointing out the regrettable lapse of accuracy that the Ministry incurred whilst denying the return of Voldemort,” he said in a snooty tone. “I do believe it is time for you take a back seat and let the professionals handle it.”

Molly, Bill, and Sumi clapped as Ron sat down. “Sorry,” Ron grinned at Hermione.

“You do impersonate him much better than I can. Anyway, Harry seemed to blink and then go quiet, and Ron and I retreated.”

“Fast,” Ron interposed.

“Because when Harry goes quiet like that, you know an explosion is about to happen. Harry reached forward and grabbed Percy, lifting him straight from the chair, thrust him against a wall and held him there for a second.”

“He turned to face me,” Ron continued. “And said, ‘Ron, I’m about to tell this prat some home truths. If you don’t want to listen, leave now.’”

“Obviously, Ron was about as likely to leave as Voldemort was to become a Tax Inspector,” Hermione took over again, “and we both stayed out the way.”

She paused and took a sip of water, and then said in a fair approximation of Harry’s tones, “Listen here, you sanctimonious git, you’re about fifteen seconds away from finding out just why I’ve been trained harder than any Auror in the country for the past year. It obviously missed your attention, as your nose is so far up Fudge’s arse, that you can’t see anything else. I am the professional, and I am more than fed up with your attitude. You are hurting my friends, and that is one thing I cannot, and will not tolerate. So you have a choice before you, Weatherby. You can go back to Fudge, and continue to be a toadie, and know that when Voldemort is defeated, you will have no life, no career, and no family. Or you can bloody think about who and what you are becoming and apologise to your family.”

“Of course,” Ron added dryly. “The fact that Harry continued to hold Percy a foot off the ground while snarling at him added the necessary emphasis that finally made Perce realise that he was being an idiot. Even if it did take him a week to apologise.”

“Harry actually called him Weatherby?” Bill laughed.

“He did,” Hermione smiled. “I was more impressed that he used the word sanctimonious in context.”

“Hermione!” Ron groaned.

The witch in question just grinned.

The Floo in the other room activated, and two faces bounded into the kitchen.

“Great, all here and no Harry. Perfect.”

“Fred, George,” Molly greeted with a smile.

“We’re not here for long. Penelope and Katie are running the shop, and we promised we’d be quick. Percy just Floo’d us and pointed out that there is something we should know here. So, what’s going on?”

Ron smiled, “Harry’s going to be playing some games with the top Aurors on a week Saturday. Percy happened to stumble over the plans for the play area earlier today and donated them to the

cause.”

Fred and George’s eyebrows rose. “Well,” they said together.

“I think that gives us enough time, doesn’t it?” Fred asked George.

“It does indeed,” George smiled. “I take it that Percy offered his help in the hope that our darling sister might be reminded that she’s as human as the rest of us?”

Everyone at the table nodded.

“And you’re all helping as well?” Fred asked.

They all nodded again, this time with wide smiles.

“Brilliant,” they said together.

“Ron, we’ll come and see you on Sunday with what we come up with, so you can build it into the strategy,” George smirked.

“It’s almost not fair,” Fred said with a fake sniff. “Those poor Aurors have no idea what they are letting themselves in for. The last time we worked together like this, the last time we all backed Harry like this – he took down Voldemort and a load of Death Eaters.”

“We know,” Bill said – his grin evil. “Harry wants to make sure that they aren’t getting complacent.”

The Floo sounded again, and Molly smiled and called out, “We’re in here, Charlie.”

Charlie walked into the kitchen, “How did you know it was me?”

“Because everyone else has already been in,” Ron said dryly. “Perce Floo you?”

“Yep, and I managed to get what is happening out of him, and I’m here to help. What’s the plan?”

“We don’t know yet,” Hermione said. “But Fred and George are going to come up with some new toys for Harry. Sumi is going to work on Harry’s stealth, Bill’s going to be working on curse detection and creation, Percy has already ‘acquired’ the plans for the area, and I’ve got some new spells I can teach him.”

“And I’ll be feeding everyone,” Molly said with a small laugh.

“Damn it,” Charlie gave a mock groan. “I knew being here last would leave me with the worst job.”

“What’s that?” Sumi asked.

“Harry’s training partner.”

The sound of laughter filled the kitchen, as Charlie took a seat, and Fred and George went back to their partners.

They were talking about Samantha, Charlie’s daughter, when the back door opened and Ginny walked in.

“Evening, Ginny,” Charlie said.

“A family reunion?” Ginny asked, a smile on her face.

“Mum insisted on feeding us,” Hermione said with a welcoming look. “We were all talking to Harry and forgot the time.”

“He’s back, is he?”

“This morning,” Ron said. “How are things down at Doughnut Central?”

“Ron!” Ginny groaned. “Just because our chief Auror has watched too many Muggle films with Harry, doesn’t mean that our Headquarters are called Doughnut Central.”

“I heard that’s all you do,” Charlie said with a teasing grin. “Sit around, eat doughnuts and play poker.”

“And keep the peace,” Ginny said with a sweetly condescending expression. “We are the thin line protecting the nation from any future uprising. Without us, this place would descend into anarchy within days.”

“Really,” Bill murmured.

“But, as you asked,” Ginny continued, as if she didn’t hear the interruption, “I’ve been chosen for a special training event next Saturday – a day of games against a competing team. It shouldn’t be too hard. We’ve seen most of the foreign Aurors, and we’re much better than they are.”

“They might surprise you,” Hermione offered.

“Unlikely,” Ginny said with an unladylike snort. “Anyway, I just popped in to check Mum was safe. I’ll see you later.”

There was silence as the red-haired girl left the kitchen, until a faint crack announced that she had Apparated away.

“How nice of her,” Molly said dryly. “I’ll be sure to let your father know what is going on. I think I’ll cook some of Harry’s favourites tomorrow, as he is doing our dirty work for us.”

“He doesn’t mind,” Hermione said instantly. “He thinks of all of us as family, so he’s not doing

anything special.”

“Even so,” Molly said. “He is still doing it. Sumi, do you mind helping me out? I’ve never been that good with Japanese cooking.”

“I would be honoured,” Sumi said with a huge smile. “Helping Harry-san will be a privilege.”

“Sumi,” Ron groaned. “I thought we’d broken you off the habit.”

Sumi blushed prettily and shrugged. “He is truly worthy of respect,” she said helplessly.

“He is,” Bill agreed. “But remember that he adores you as well, and that you have paid him what he considers the ultimate in respect by naming him as the godfather to your child.”

Sumi nodded, and Ron leaned over to gently kiss her.

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Molly said approvingly. “But it’s getting late, so all of you, off home.”

“Yes mum,” the chorus came from everyone there.

“Morning, Harry,” Charlie said, as he rested against the doorframe to Harry’s large house.

“Morning, Charlie, how’s Sammy?”

“Wanting her favourite uncle to come visit again soon!”

Harry smiled. “How about this evening?”

“Perfect. She’ll be happy all week then.”

Harry paused and then smiled. “How about I look after her for the night? You and Fleur can go out.”

“Really?” Charlie asked eagerly.

“Sure,” Harry smiled.

“Cool,” Charlie grinned. “Anyway, I thought we’d have a bit of a jog first, and then work on a bit of hand to hand stuff.”

Harry nodded and started to stretch.

“You’ve kept in pretty good shape,” Charlie said, as he watched Harry.

“I’ve not got much else to do,” Harry explained. “And I refuse to let myself go soft, just in case, you know?”

Charlie nodded. “A lot of us feel that way. We lived through one war, and if it looks like it might come back, we want to be ready.”

“Exactly,” Harry nodded. “Come on then, let’s go.”

They were both dressed in Muggle outfits that allowed them to jog along the country lanes. Charlie set a pretty fast pace, wanting to see just how fit Harry was. Since he had returned to England, Charlie was working with the Chudley Canons as their fitness coach and spent his entire working life keeping fit.

A few miles later, Charlie called a halt, and they moved into a large field.

“Right,” Charlie said. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

It was a fun morning for Charlie; it was rare that he got to practise the fighting that he had learnt for the fight with Voldemort, and there weren’t many people in the country as good as he was.

Except for Harry; the man had taken to fighting like he had to Quidditch. While Charlie might not have won the majority of today’s scrimmages, he did win enough to keep his pride.

When they had finished, Charlie collapsed into the grass, breathing hard. “You don’t need any help with that,” he gasped. “But we’ll get you a bit fitter – you’ve lost a little of your edge.”

“It’s all the international travel,” Harry said in agreement. “It mucks up my schedule so that I can’t train as I’d like.”

“I’ve got to get to work,” Charlie continued. “What time are you coming by?”

“I’ll pick Sammy up at five,” Harry offered. “I’ll feed her as well.”

Harry stretched and walked up the driveway toward Charlie and Fleur’s house, carrying his invisibility cloak and broom. All the Weasley’s had anti-Apparition wards around them – it was something Harry had insisted on installing for them. It protected his family, and at the same time, it meant he felt safe when visiting them.

Sumi’s lessons had started with her teaching him how to control his breathing. He was used to using his lung power to increase his physical power, but this was almost the opposite. He had to breathe through his mouth to avoid any unnecessary noise, and at the same time, not take any sharp breaths, no matter how he moved. It had taken some time to get accustomed to doing that reflexively, but with a little effort, he seemed to be doing fine now.

As he got halfway up the house, he spotted a blonde head in the front window and faintly heard a squeal. He smiled and prepared himself, dropping the broom and the cloak to the ground.

The front door opened, and a petite blonde missile streaked out, moving as fast as her legs could

carry her.

“Uncle Harry,” the missile yelled, jumping straight at him.

Harry caught the seven year old in mid flight and lifted her high in the air.

“You’ve grown,” he said accusingly.

“I have,” Sammy agreed. “I’m a big girl now.”

Harry nodded solemnly. “Too big for pizza and ice cream for tea?”

Sammy shook her head fast.

“Good, you remember the drill?”

Sammy nodded solemnly, and Harry put her down. “Let’s say goodbye to your Mum.”

Sammy dashed off – she seemed incapable of merely doing anything as prosaic as walking, and she jumped at her mother. “I’m going now so you and Daddy can go get me a brother,” she announced to Fleur.

Fleur raised an eyebrow. “A brother?”

“Michelle has one,” Sammy said. “He smells funny, but I think it would be nice to have one around. And Michelle said that Daddies and Mummies go and get a baby from somewhere, and then Mummy eats him for aaaaggggeeeesss, and then I can have a brother.”

Harry tried hard not to laugh at the expression on Fleur’s face. He was pretty sure that the act, at least, if not the result, was the plan for tonight.

“Charlie said that you’re going to feed her tonight, right?” Fleur said, obviously deciding to ignore her daughter.

“Oh no,” Sammy cried, “he always makes me eat healthy stuff!” The way the girl said *healthy* made it clear that it was a swear word.

“It’s good for you,” Fleur pointed out. “I wish you’d eat more of that stuff for me.” A few years in the country had enabled her to speak English without the accent.

Sammy shook her head and gave her mother a quick hug, before launching herself into Harry’s arms again.

“Come on, Uncle Harry,” she said excitedly. “We can go flying on your broom.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Harry grinned. “I’ll bring her back in the morning, Fleur.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Fleur said seriously. “We do appreciate it.”

“Any time,” Harry replied, turning and walking out the room.

“Ron’s still jealous that you’ll let Harry fly with Samantha, and not him,” Charlie said as he walked into the kitchen, absently doing the cuffs of his shirt up.

Fleur sighed. “What would happen if she fell off when she was flying with Ron?”

“She’d never fall off.”

“But if she did, what would happen?”

“Ron would try to catch her,” Charlie replied.

“What would happen if she fell off with Harry?”

Charlie opened his mouth and then shut it again, looking a little sheepish.

“Exactly,” Fleur said. “Harry would catch her, and nothing, not the laws of physics, not the laws of magic, nor his own safety would stop him. And that’s why.”

Charlie nodded. “When you put it like that,” he smiled and gave his wife a quick kiss. “So, a brother for Samantha?”

“Well,” Fleur said thoughtfully. “We could see what we get. I always liked having a younger sister. We can afford it, so why not?”

Charlie grinned. “And if not, we can always practice a bit.”

Fleur reached up and gave him a kiss that left his knees weak. “A lot,” she whispered. “Now, let’s go eat so we can get home and start.”

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I know, I love you too,” Fleur replied with a smile. “And if you’re good, we can play a round of the Auror and the Naughty Veela.”

Charlie’s grin grew, as he started to work out what he could do for Harry, because he really owed him for this.

“Up,” Harry said to the broom. It jumped obediently into his hand, and he straddled it, picking the young girl up and placing her firmly in front of him.

“Can I steer?”

“Are you going to tell your mum?”

“Of course not,” Sammy said, sounding disgusted.

“Take her away,” Harry grinned, and wrapped his arms around her.

The broom rose, a little unsteadily, before starting to move forward.

“That way,” Harry pointed, wrapping the invisibility cloak around them both.

“Yeeaaaahhh!” Sammy yelled, and pushed the broom forward.

It was much harder letting her drive than doing it himself, because he had to concentrate harder to keep the broom stable. He wasn't worried about her doing it without him; he'd told her very firmly that if she did, she would never be allowed onto his broom again and at the same time, he'd charmed all the family brooms not to respond to her.

It wasn't that he didn't trust her; it was just that she was a very inquisitive seven year old.

They landed outside his house – he took control for getting through the wards and the landing – and walked inside. “You order the pizza; I'll get the drinks.”

Sammy nodded and dashed to the phone. She picked it up and dialled the number from memory. “Michelle doesn't have one of these,” she shouted to Harry. “She thinks they're silly Muggle things, but I told her how they can order pizza, and now she wants one.” Her voice paused for a second. “Oh hello, Giorgio,” she said into the receiver. “It's Sammy. Me and Harry want one of your specials.”

There was another pause. “Thanks Giorgio,” she said. “And can you send some ice cream as well?”

“Thank you,” she said and hung up. “Twenty five minutes, Uncle Harry,” she shouted as she ran into his living room and skidded to a halt. “How come all witches don't have all this cool stuff?” she yelled.

“Most witches don't like them, and electricity and magic don't really mix,” Harry said, as he brought two glasses of ice-cold coke into the room.

“You have them,” Sammy pointed out with impeccable logic.

“But I have friends that can get around that sort of thing,” Harry explained.

Sammy nodded and picked a DVD, placing it in the tray and jumping on the couch.

“Come and watch with me,” she pleaded.

“Of course,” Harry smiled, sitting next to her.

They paused the DVD for the pizza – a cooling charm kept the ice cream cold, and after they had both over-eaten, they lounged on the couch, Sammy lying on Harry.

“Why do Muggles always make their animals talk in cartoons?” Sammy asked.

“Because they can’t talk to them in real life.”

“Why don’t you have any pets?”

“I had one once, a lovely owl called Hedwig.”

“What happened to her?”

“She was killed by the nasty Snakeman,” Harry sighed. “I never bothered to get one again after that.”

“Uncle Harry?”

“Yes, Sammy?”

“Why are you two people?”

“What do you mean?”

Sammy scrunched up her face in thought and shifted so that she was lying on his chest, staring up at him. “To me, you’re Uncle Harry, right?”

“Right.”

“To Mum and Dad, and to all my uncles and aunts, you’re Harry, the same person, right?”

“Right.”

“But to everyone else, you’re Harry Potter, right?”

“Right,” Harry said for the third time.

“And Harry Potter is a hero, right?”

Harry winced.

“But to me, you’re still Uncle Harry, right?”

Harry nodded.

“Is it hard being two people?”

“In a way, yes. Because I don’t like being Harry Potter,” Harry explained. “And that’s who most

people want to meet and expect. I like being Uncle Harry; it's who I am."

Sammy nodded solemnly. "But you're a hero, no matter who you are."

"I am?" Harry asked.

Sammy nodded again. "You're the bestest grownup in the world. You let me do all sorts of cool stuff that none of my friends can do, and all my friends are really jealous that I know Harry Potter, and I keep telling them that Uncle Harry is better than Harry Potter, but they don't believe me."

Harry laughed softly. "Let's just keep what we do under your hat; we don't want your mum finding out."

Sammy shuddered theatrically.

"Uncle Harry?"

"Yes, Sammy."

"How are babies made?"

Harry froze for a second, wondering how the hell he was going to get out of this one. In the end, he intelligently decided that retreat was the best response. "That's the sort of question that Mum's are best at answering," he said evenly.

"Oh, okay," Sammy said cheerfully. "Can we watch TV for a bit?"

Harry picked up his wand from the floor, banished the mess on the table to the rubbish bin, and handed her the remote.

Hermione stepped into the private Floo, and she stepped out into Harry's kitchen. The house was silent, apart from the sounds of Harry's TV from the front room. She walked in and smiled slightly.

Harry was asleep on the couch; Samantha was asleep on top of him.

She pulled a blanket off the back of the couch, covered them gently, and turned the TV off.

She walked silently back to the kitchen.

"Thanks," she heard Harry whisper, and she smiled to herself. She should have known she'd never be able to sneak up on him, especially when he was responsible for something or someone.

She stepped into the Floo and went home.

"That was quick?" Bill asked.

“Samantha was asleep on Harry again.”

Bill smiled. “He’d make a wonderful father.”

“I know,” Hermione sighed. “And a wonderful husband. He just needs someone who doesn’t see the most eligible bachelor in the country for the past six years running, and sees Harry.”

She watched as Bill climbed out of his chair and walked over to her. “It will happen,” he said seriously. “I refuse to accept that anyone who gives as much as Harry has is destined to die alone.”

Hermione nodded. “I hope so,” she whispered. “I really hope so.”

“I know,” Bill whispered, and started kissing her neck

“I’ve been thinking,” Hermione said.

“Hmm?”

“Well, now that I’m a professor, it wouldn’t be hard for me to have a year off work.”

Bill leaned back without saying anything, and she continued nervously. “And, well, I’m finding myself a little jealous of Sumi.”

“You want a baby?” Bill asked with a surprised look on his face.

“I know I said I wanted a career, and I still do,” Hermione assured him. “I just think that it might be time.”

Bill nodded, and she couldn’t read his expression. “Is that all right?”

Bill smirked at her, and she relaxed as he picked her up. “All right?” he asked dryly. “Let’s just go upstairs and let me show you how all right it is.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, suddenly feeling a little light-headed. “That sounds like a good idea.”

“Mummy,” Samantha said as she sat in the bath, playing with the bubbles.

“Yes, dear?”

“Why doesn’t Uncle Harry have a girlfriend?”

“What do you mean?” Fleur asked.

“Well,” Samantha said as she lifted her hands up and blew the bubbles into the air. “Uncle Ron has Aunt Sumi. Uncle Percy has Aunt Angelina, Uncles Fred and George have Aunts Katie and

Penelope, and Uncle Bill has Aunt Hermione. But Uncle Harry is just himself. So why hasn't Uncle Harry got a girlfriend he can turn into another Aunt for me."

"I think," Fleur said carefully. "It's because all the girls want to date Harry Potter."

"Oh, and they don't see that Harry Potter is just Harry," Samantha said sadly. "I asked Uncle Harry what it was like to be two people, and he was sad."

"I know, sweetie."

"Can I be Uncle Harry's girlfriend when I grow up?" Samantha asked, closing her eyes tight as Fleur poured some shampoo onto her hair.

Fleur froze and took a deep breath, suddenly finding her heart beating faster than she had ever thought possible. "Has Uncle Harry talked to you about it?" she asked carefully.

Samantha giggled. "I want to surprise Uncle Harry," she said. "Uncle Harry should be happy. He smiles when he's around me."

"He loves you," Fleur said gently, finding her heart slowing down, as unwanted and unwarranted thoughts vanished from her mind. "But it's the same way that Daddy and I love you and not the way that Uncle Bill loves Aunt Hermione."

Samantha frowned and then slowly pouted. "I can still be friends with him and pretend, right?"

"Right," Fleur said dryly. "But you might want to look at boys your own age."

"But they smell, and Michelle says that they have the lurgies."

"They do get better as they get older," Fleur said with a smile. "Did you eat enough last night?"

"Uncle Harry made me eat lettuce," Samantha said, and then held her nose as she rinsed her hair under the water. "I'm not a rabbit."

"No, you're a little girl," Fleur agreed. "Stand up." She wrapped a towel around her daughter and started to dry her.

"We should get Uncle Harry a rabbit. Then he could give the rabbit the lettuce, and I wouldn't have to eat it. And then maybe Uncle Harry won't miss Hedwig so much."

"How do you know about Hedwig?"

"I asked Uncle Harry why he didn't have any pets, and he told me that the nasty Snakeman killed his owl. Why would the man do that?"

"He was evil," Fleur said simply. "We were all scared of him."

“Except for Uncle Harry, right? Uncle Harry isn’t scared of anyone.”

“Except for Uncle Harry,” Fleur agreed. “Uncle Harry fought the bad man so that everyone else would be able to live without the fear.”

“Do you think Uncle Harry would like Aunt Ginny?”

“Do you ever get tired of asking questions?”

“No,” Samantha said immediately. “I don’t want them to like each other.”

“Why not?”

“Because Aunt Ginny’s been mean recently. I don’t like her.”

“You don’t?”

“No. She thinks I’m a kid. I’m not – I’m seven years old!”

“I know you are,” Fleur laughed softly and hugged her. “A very mature seven year old.”

Harry looked at the road in front of him; at the end was a small hut, guarded by thirty of the best Aurors in the country.

All he had to do was get past them, get a flag out of it, and return here.

He felt ready. The twins had outdone themselves with toys. Ron had come up with some strategies to use them. Sumi had finished teaching him how to move like an animal. Charlie had him back up to full fitness, Bill had taught him a new way to detect traps, and Hermione had taught him some new curses that seemed very interesting.

And to top it off, he had Sammy’s hair ribbon in his pocket as a good luck charm. She’d wanted him to wear it, but Fleur had pointed out that it would make him stand out.

Sammy had told him, very firmly, to show Aunt Ginny that he was the bestest, because he didn’t treat her like a kid.

He’d smiled and hugged her. She had her mother’s stubbornness and her father’s temper, and she could be a royal brat some of the time.

But she was also the first child he’d actually found the time to get to know, and while he hadn’t really met her until she was four, it had been love at first sight when he had.

It had made him realise just how lucky he had been with Draco and Cho. It would tear him apart to know that he had someone like Sammy with someone else.

He ruthlessly shoved the feeling away, took a deep relaxing breath, then cast a Chameleon charm on himself and blended against the background.

The games were about to begin.

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Alone

Part 2

A bright magical flare arced into the air and then exploded in a swirl of colours that must have been visible for a mile.

It was the sign to begin.

Harry stepped off the road and dropped to his knees, laying flat on the ground. He slowly inched his way forward to the edge of grass and looked down the road. He couldn't see anything that looked suspicious – everything was quiet and serene.

He knew, however, that there were thirty of the best Aurors in the country between him and his goal.

The course was laid out in a relatively simple manner. There was one road that led down to a single cottage. The road twisted back and forth along a two-mile track. Immediately in front of him was some very long grass, followed by a dense wooded area. Further down, the foliage was limited; remaining undetected would be a lot harder, as the hiding places became few and far between.

He eased his wand out of his pocket and pointed it down the road. With a frown of deep concentration, he cast a spell. This was one of Hermione's newer ones, and it wouldn't be something the Aurors would even know about. Her job as professor at the new Magical University gave her a lot of resources for inventing new charms.

The spell echoed down the road, and he closed his eyes. A few seconds later, he'd pinpointed the location of all thirty Aurors. Hermione had told him that the spell worked like radar – bouncing off the magical cores of Wizards.

It didn't take much of a mental trick to correlate those blips of magic onto the map of the area he had memorised before the exercise began. Not for the first time, he was pretty amazed at just how damn smart Hermione was; it was scary, really, when he thought about it.

There were two Aurors quite close by, lying in ambush for him. He started to move toward them, circling a little. It was slow going; there was an inherent lag in the chameleon charm, so moving fast would have made it useless, but he wasn't exactly pressed for time.

Harry eventually spotted them; they were lying in the long grass, firmly concentrating on the road. He eased up to them from behind.

“Report,” he whispered in a harsh voice.

“No sign of them yet, sir,” the one on the left whispered automatically.

“Idiot,” Harry sighed and stunned him, casting a second stunner as soon as he could, taking them

both out of the game.

He rolled them over and smiled. He undid the buttons on the robe of the first one, and he cancelled his chameleon charm. A minute later, he was dressed in the uniform of an Auror. A quick search through their wallets revealed the names of his two victims.

Now that he had obtained a new outfit, he just needed a new face. And the dark-haired unconscious Auror supplied that for him as well. He turned and headed toward the next clump of Aurors. They were hiding in a small grove of trees a little further along the track, their wands out.

He moved over to them, trying to remember the Auror training he had received, so that he would move like them – rather than the more stealthy approach that was now second nature to him.

“They’re coming,” he panted, trying to impersonate the Auror who had spoken to him. “They got James without even trying.”

“Who are they?”

“The Japanese,” Harry said back, moving out of sight. “They move like ghosts.”

“The bloody Japs?” another asked.

Harry nodded and then pointed, “Can you see them?”

The five Aurors all turned to face the threat, and Harry almost sighed aloud again. Two of the five were ex-DA members, and they should have reacted differently. They should have checked him out thoroughly beforehand and not just accepted him at face value. The charm he had used to change his face was pretty easy to discover, if they had bothered to actually check.

“Where?” Terry Boot asked. “I can’t see them.”

“That’s because you forgot what Mad-Eye used to say,” Harry said.

“What?” Terry asked, squinting as he tried to see into the distance.

“Constant Vigilance,” Harry yelled as he cast a couple of stunners, hitting Terry and another Auror in the back. He kept moving as the others turned, pocketing his wand, and grabbing the wrists of two Aurors until their now drawn wands were pointed at each other.

The two Aurors couldn’t stop the spells they had started; they stunned each other.

The last Auror looked at Harry, an expression of fear on her face. “You’re not Gerald,” she said.

“Ten points to Ravenclaw,” Harry smirked, ignoring the wand that was pointed at him.

“Who are you?”

“Now where would the surprise be if I told you that?” Harry asked, moving sideways while holding his hands out un-threateningly.

“Don’t move,” the Auror ordered harshly. “I’ve got you covered.”

“Yes, you have,” Harry agreed amiably. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Turn around,” The Auror said, sounding a little nervous.

Harry turned, idly wondering if she’d just send up a charm asking for help. It would be the logical thing to do – call for reinforcements. Of course, if she did, then her wand wouldn’t be pointed at him anymore; that would all the chance he would need.

Of course, he had about fifteen other ways of getting out of this situation, depending on what she did.

“Move,” she said.

He didn’t, wanting to see what would happen.

“I said, move,” she grunted, poking him with her wand.

He could feel the wand on the left of his back, and he exploded into movement. He twisted to the right, moving away from the wand, his right hand coming out to push the wand away from him, as his left hand flew up and caught the Auror straight on the chin.

There was the sound of breaking bone, before the Auror toppled down to the grass, unconscious. He looked down at her and grabbed her wand. He walked off, whistling softly. He’d wanted to hit Marietta for a long, long time now, and this was the first chance he’d got. He never had forgiven her for betraying the D.A. back in his fifth year.

Seven down, twenty three to go.

He moved to the edge of the woods and paused. He reached into his pocket and pulled out six dolls, all dressed in the robes of the French Aurors. He placed them down, pulling strings out of the centre of their backs and then settled back to watch.

The dolls quickly grew to full size, and working together, slowly walked out of the trees and toward the hut. The six dolls each had their wands out and were moving in a professional manner.

As they got halfway down the road, ten Aurors appeared out of the grass, their invisibility cloaks being thrown to one side.

“Freeze!” they shouted. “No one move.”

The dolls did as commanded, literally freezing mid-step.

“Who are you?” One of the Aurors snarled.

The dolls all turned their heads to look at him – the rest of their bodies staying unnaturally still. “We are messengers,” they said in unison.

“What’s that?” the Auror asked, suspicion starting to form on his face.

“Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” There was a pause, and then they continued. “Fred and George would also like to remind the stupid English Aurors that they always need to be on CONSTANT VIGILANCE!”

“Shit,” one of the Aurors swore as he turned and started to dive away – but it was too late. The six dolls exploded, coating them all in a thick gooey substance. The Aurors struggled, but it was useless. The goo simply constricted, tying them all together.

Harry walked up to them. As he got near, he reached out a finger and scooped up some of the goo. He tasted it cautiously and looked surprised. It tasted of strawberries and cream. He shook his head, grinning. Only Fred and George would make something so useful taste good as well.

“Do I need to stun you?” Harry asked the frozen Aurors cheerfully.

“No,” Ernie MacMillian sighed. “We’re done. And if we’d known we’d be going up against you, we’d not have bothered getting out of bed.”

“Me?” Harry asked, surprised.

“Yeah, you, the man under the disguise,” Ernie said firmly. “Harry Potter.”

“How did you know?”

“Because no one else would be crazy enough to use Fred and George’s inventions on an exercise like this. No one else would take on thirty Aurors alone. No one else could do that, Harry; no one else alive.”

Harry shrugged. “You always were a smart one, Ernie. So why have you been caught so easily?”

Ernie tried to look around, but couldn’t, the goo had set. “Because we got lazy – that’s the point of this exercise, isn’t it? To point out that we need to spend less time playing cards and more time making sure we are ready.”

“Yep,” Harry agreed. “It’s always a bad idea to send the Chief Auror home from a poker night empty-handed.”

“Damn it,” one of the other Aurors groaned. “I’m going to kill Ginny when we get out of this. It was her bloody idea to do it.”

“I wouldn’t be too concerned about that,” Harry said absently. “When we’ve finished this, I’m

going to be having a bit of a word with all of you. And I'll want to know exactly why playing poker is more important than training for what you get paid for."

There was a strange sound, as ten pairs of eye balls blinked at the same time, and then ten vocal chords all emitted the same groan.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a flag to capture." Harry turned and picked up one of the discarded invisibility cloaks, vanishing instantly from sight.

"Shit," Ernie sighed. "You know, I really wish *I'd* slept in today."

There was a general mumble of agreement from his fellow Aurors as they settled down to await their eventual release.

Harry moved under the Cloak, touching his wand to his glasses. This was a trick he'd learnt from Mad-Eye himself. It charmed the left side of his glasses, so he could see through invisibility cloaks and see magical auras.

About a quarter of a mile in front of him were the next group of Aurors. They were still grouped together, and it was one of the things he was going to have a word with them about. Their habit of sticking so close together made them a lot easier to deal with – as he could get a lot in one go, rather than have to take them out individually, which would have been a lot harder.

He walked toward them, taking his time. He stopped about fifty metres from them and whistled under his breath. He could recognise a couple more ex-DA members in the group – even though they were hidden under cloaks. They were walking across the path in front of him, gazes firmly fixed on the road ahead.

One of the first things Kingsley had done as Chief Auror was push for the Aurors to have access to the cloaks, pointing out that they were an incredibly valuable tool. The Ministry, flush with the success of vanquishing Voldemort had authorised his request without thinking about how much it would cost them.

It was a mistake the Ministry had never made again.

The Aurors were standing on a type of gravel called pea-shingle that would make sneaking up on them a lot harder. But this was what Sumi had spent the last ten days teaching him how to do, and it was time to put it into practice. He couldn't use magic as he wasn't sure how the Cloak would react to him casting a spell on himself underneath it, and he didn't want to reveal his presence accidentally.

He lowered his hands to his side and relaxed, starting to control his breathing. He picked his back foot up slowly and inched it to the front of his body. He then carefully lowered his foot until it was a few inches from the ground. He turned his toes pointing up and made contact with the ground with the outside ball of his right foot. He carefully lowered his heel and then his toes, checking for anything that might make a noise if he put his weight on it. Finding nothing, he

placed his weight, and started again.

It was an incredibly slow way of moving, each step taking nearly a minute, but it ensure that he was absolutely silent. It was hard on his body, but Charlie had helped him get his edge back, and he was used to hard work.

He reached the first of the Aurors and crouched low to the ground, slowly inching his wand under the cloak, hoping that he wouldn't see the tip among the shingle.

“*Petrificus Totalus*,” he exhaled under his breath. This would have been the fantastic time for wandless magic – unfortunately his abilities there were limited to a robust summoning charm, which he could pretty much do at anytime, and random bits of magic that would appear whenever he was emotionally charged. He'd never developed the sort of control over wandless magic that Albus and Voldemort had achieved.

He could see the Auror freeze and smiled to himself. One down.

It wasn't very sporting of him – but then again, he wasn't there to be sporting. He was pretty disgusted with the lack of traps so far. They seemed to be relying on their magical cloaks far too much. One by one, he picked off the rest of the group.

With the other hidden Aurors taken care of, it only left six guarding the flag. He could see two of them – not under cloaks – guarding the door and the other four inside.

He contemplated a straight attack; there was a high chance he'd be able to get through, but he decided not to. Ron had given him some pretty strict instructions on what to do so far, and it had worked perfectly.

He walked confidently up to the door, deliberately making some noise.

“Are they even coming?” he whispered to the one on the left. “This is bloody boring.”

“I know,” the Auror whispered back. “They've probably been stopped by James and Gerald – and no one's bothered to tell us yet.”

Harry snorted under his breath. “Probably,” he agreed in a whisper. He pushed his wand gently out of the front of the cloak and whispered, “*Imperio*.”

He'd obtained permission from Kingsley earlier to use the Unforgivable. Fighting the *Imperio* was one of the tests that Aurors had to pass to qualify – but the Chief suspected that a lot of them had stopped practising, believing that no one would ever put them under it. He applied a small communication charm to his new puppet that allowed the puppet to hear whatever he said, as if he was whispering into his ear.

“Point far down the road, and ask if the other Auror sees anything,” Harry whispered.

The Auror turned and did exactly as he was told, enabling Harry to walk around quickly and stun

the distracted Auror without any bother.

He walked to the door and peered in. The flag was guarded by Ginny, Tonks, Zacharias Smith, and an Auror he didn't recognise. He smiled to himself; the flag had the Gryffindor shield on it.

The four Aurors were talking quietly, all keeping an eye on the door and not the flag.

He moved to the side of the door and slowly pushed his wand out of his cloak again, using the wooden door as a cover, and as silently as he could, he cast the chameleon charm on flag.

He turned and moved over to the Auror under the *Imperio* us and whispered. "I want you to run to the door, shout 'Accio Flag' but don't cast the spell, and then run away, holding this."

He shrugged off the Aurors robes he was wearing under the Cloak, and transfigured it so that it was black and looked vaguely like the flag from a distance.

"Go," he said, as he moved back to the side of the door.

The Auror, his eyes still blank, walked to the door, pointed his wand, and shouted the words, before turning and running away, holding the robes bundled against his chest.

He watched with a smile on his face as the four Aurors turned and saw that the flag was gone and swore as one. They turned and ran for the door, their wands out and ready.

Harry smirked and cast a tripping jinx at Tonks, who stumbled, knocking the others over.

"Sorry," she said and scrambled back to her feet, chasing down the running Auror.

The other three left the cottage as well, following close after her.

Harry shook his head and walked in. He took off his cloak and removed the spell he was using to change his features, cancelled the chameleon spell on the flag, and grabbed a chair, taking it outside.

He sat down comfortably and watched as the Aurors bundled the cursed Auror over.

"*Finite Incantatem*," he heard Ginny say.

Harry cleared his throat. Loudly.

As one, the four Aurors froze and turned to face him.

They slowly walked back toward him, their wands by their sides. He waited until they were standing in front of him, and he looked up from his seat.

"Pathetic," he whispered softly. "You were trained better than this."

“But...” Ginny started.

Harry held up his hand, stopping her. “I really hope that you do better this afternoon.”

“So do I,” Kingsley said as he walked over, Mad-Eye Moody beside him.

“Good tactics, Potter,” Mad-Eye snorted.

“They were Ron’s,” Harry shrugged.

Mad-Eye nodded. “He always was good at them. What the hell was the spell you cast first?”

“Magical Radar. It pings on everything with a magical core.”

“That’s not fair,” Zachariah protested. “Using spells that we haven’t got access to.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at him. “What has war got to do with being fair? Are you Aurors or athletes?” he asked. There was no answer. “I take it you’d like it if the bad guys would register all the curses they might use against you beforehand? When Voldemort was still running around, they weren’t so accommodating.”

Mad-Eye snorted, sounding amused.

Zach, Ginny, Tonks, and the other Auror all looked down, avoiding his gaze.

“Why don’t we go and have lunch,” Harry said to Kingsley and Mad-Eye, “and we can talk about what Kingsley’s going to cook next week.”

Kingsley nodded and looked at the four Aurors in front of him. “I warned you to be on your guard,” he said softly. “Please don’t let me down again this afternoon. I honestly expected better from you. Not one of you thought about what you were doing – you just reacted to the trap Harry set.

“You’ll find five petrified Aurors in the two first positions, ten covered in a Fred and George concoction further down. The others are waiting for you back at the base – apart from Marietta, who’s getting her jaw repaired. Have some lunch and work on your tactics for when you have to capture the flag this afternoon.

“You know who you are facing now, and you know that he he’s been working with Fred, George, Ron, and Hermione. Make me proud.”

Kingsley turned on his heel and walked off with Harry and Mad-Eye.

The three men walked through a ward and appeared in a large stone courtyard. As they became visible, a bunch of red-heads, interspersed with numerous females with varying hair colour all got to their feet and starting cheering and shouting.

“That was brilliant, Harry,” Ron shouted first. “None of them even came close, and Marietta – man, I could kiss you!”

Hermione reached out and elbowed Ron gently.

Sumi smiled brilliantly. “I am so pleased you mastered the walk,” she said. “I was so proud when I saw you creeping along.”

“What was it like?” Harry asked.

“Hermione’s charm was perfect,” Bill said proudly. “We could see everything as clear as if it was right in front of us. The charm followed you all along the path and showed how you took out each group.”

“And might we add,” Fred said.

“That our toys worked perfectly,” George finished.

“Shush, both of you,” Penelope said promptly. “No one loves a boaster.”

“Yes, dear,” they said in unison.

“Fred, George,” Penelope said warningly.

“Sorry, dear,” Fred replied apologetically.

“Anyway,” Charlie said, “what did you think about it, Harry?”

Harry sat down on the bench and smiled as Molly immediately placed a plate full of picnic food in front of him.

“Disappointing,” he sighed. “No traps, complete reliance on equipment. Real Death Eaters would have walked through them in no time at all.”

“Regrettably, I find myself in complete agreement with Harry’s assessment,” Percy said quietly. “I believe that commendations are in order, Kingsley, for noticing the problem and creating such a unique way of highlighting it.”

“Thanks, I think,” Kingsley said with a sigh. “I really hoped that I was mistaken, you know? I’d hoped that things weren’t *this* bad.”

“They’re not,” Mad-Eye grunted. “They’re just lazy, not unskilled. You’ll see them doing better this afternoon. Well, they better do well; you certainly spelled it out for them.”

“Why did you do that anyway?” Charlie asked.

“Because in real life, sometimes they *will* know who they are raiding,” Harry said. “It’s more

realistic this way. The challenge is for me to still win. And this is where some of the curses Bill taught me are going to be useful, as well as the rest of the toys from Fred and George.”

“You remember the plan for dealing with them?” Ron checked.

“Of course,” Harry nodded. “Guerrilla tactics – take out a couple at a time consistently and deal with the rest, one on one.”

“One on one?” Molly asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “This is a training exercise for them, after all. The people who get through the course and traps will get to duel me for the flag.”

“What if they all get through?” Angelina asked warily.

“Then we’ll see if I’m as good as everyone thinks I am.”

“Harry!” Molly, Sumi, and Hermione all said at the same time.

Harry smirked at them and offered them a mock little bow. “It won’t happen,” he said confidently. “Only a couple will get through.”

“Probably Ginny and Tonks,” Kingsley said slowly. “They are the best.”

Harry shrugged. “Who is looking out for Sammy today?” he asked Fleur.

“She’s on an outing with Gabrielle.”

Harry raised his eyebrows at the strange phrasing.

Fleur smiled helplessly. “If I mentioned the word *baby-sit*, I would have a Veela-sized tantrum on my hands.”

Harry chuckled under his breath and grinned at her, taking a piece of quiche. “So,” he adopted a look of innocence. “Did you two find a baby brother for Sammy?”

Charlie and Fleur both blushed, bright red. “Harry!” Charlie said.

“Is that a yes?”

“It is,” Fleur said proudly, her cheeks still rosy. “In eight months, three weeks, Sammy will have a brother.”

There was the ear piercing sound of a few too many females squealing at the same time, causing Harry to quickly charm his ears. A microsecond later, Fleur was embraced by a rampaging Molly Weasley.

Harry looked at Fleur for a second and then turned his attention to Hermione. “So, professor,” he said cheerfully. “Anything you want to share as well?”

“Harry James Potter!” Hermione called out, stamping her foot.

“Hmm?” Harry asked, his eyes twinkling.

“Bloody hell,” Ron said slowly.

“Language, Ron,” Molly said automatically from her place next to Fleur.

“Not now, Mum,” Ron said absently. “Everybody turn and look at Harry.”

“What?” Harry asked, raising his hands defensively.

“Oh my Lord,” Hermione said slowly. “You’re right.”

“Right about what?” Harry asked, starting to feel very nervous.

“It’s just starting,” Fred agreed. “This is wonderful.”

“What?” Harry demanded.

“Your eyes are twinkling,” Bill said softly. “Add to that the way you don’t miss anything, and you know what we see?”

Harry thought for a second and then groaned, putting his head in his hands. “Not like him,” he muttered. “Please, don’t let me become another Dumbledore.”

“I know,” Hermione said, walking over to him and hugging him, Ron doing the same. “It doesn’t have to be that way. His problem was always that he was acting alone. You won’t be.”

“Promise?” Harry asked softly.

“Always,” Hermione and Ron said together.

“Damn right,” Sumi and Bill added.

“Exactly,” Percy said. “Albus’ mistakes have been well-documented, and not to toot our own horn, but if there is one thing this family is good at – apart from offering an endless supply of love – it is the ability to keep one on an even keel. No one here will allow you to believe your own press clippings.”

“Overly wordy, but well said,” Charlie muttered.

“Case in point,” Percy said, smiling and nodding at Charlie. “Honestly, I wouldn’t worry about it, Harry. The signs have been visible for sometime. Everyone respects you and looks at you for

help and guidance. Unlike Albus, you do have an intricate support network. It has been this way in the Wizarding world for centuries...”

“Nineteen, since Cyneglis the Merciful,” Hermione interrupted.

“Really?” Percy asked. “I always thought it was Mykanthorpe the Noble who was the first. Not that it matters; the point is that throughout modern history there has been one person who has stood out as a guiding light. With Albus dead, the position has been vacated, and one of the key signs, as prosaic as it might be, is the twinkling of eyes and the insight. Hermione, I take it that Harry was right?”

“I didn’t want to make the announcement like this,” Hermione grumbled, digging her elbow directly into Harry’s ribs. “But yes, I cast the charm this morning. I am pregnant and should give birth pretty much exactly the same time as Fleur.”

Harry immediately stood up and moved smartly to the left.

He was just in time as Molly, after looking torn for a moment over which adopted-daughter to embrace, barrelled over to Hermione, tears falling down her face.

“Dangerous work,” Mad-Eye said softly to Kingsley, referring to the hugs Molly was bestowing on anyone who happened to wander within arm’s reach.

“Not really,” Harry said, looking up at both of them.

Mad-Eye held his gaze for a few seconds, before looking away. “Abnormally sharp hearing you have there, Potter.”

Harry shrugged. “Can you all do me a favour,” he said loudly, “and keep this under your hats for a bit? I’ve got no wish to start joining committees quite yet. There will be plenty of time for that in the future.”

“We’re not wearing hats, though,” Fred pointed out.

“It’s a Muggle expression,” Kingsley said, looking pleased he could share the knowledge. “It comes from when Muggles wore hats a lot, and keeping something there was out of sight.”

“Oh, right,” George said, exchanging a long look with Fred.

Harry shook his head and rescued his plate. “I need to get ready for the next show,” he said with a grin. “Smoke me a kipper; I’ll be back for breakfast.”

“What a guy!” Kingsley said and then started to blush as everyone looked at him. “What? It’s from a Muggle TV show, okay?” he said defensively.

“Keep telling them that, K,” Harry grinned. “Maybe they’ll believe it one day.”

“Get out of here,” Kingsley groaned.

Harry laughed and turned away, just hearing Molly ask, “Does he really want a smoked kipper?”

Harry was laying flat on his stomach, covered with the chameleon charm, his wand in front of him, watching the start of the course through a pair of concealed Omnioculars.

The same burst of fireworks announced the second half of the day’s entertainment as it had that morning. The group of thirty Aurors took a step down onto the path.

And immediately stepped into the portable swamp Harry had placed there. There was some swearing from the group of trapped Aurors.

They should really have known better , he reflected quietly.

He smiled slightly as Ginny pushed her way to the front and stood by the edge of the swamp. He wasn’t sure what she was saying, but from the looks on the faces of the others around her, it wasn’t polite.

She gestured sharply, and two Aurors pulled out their wands and started to scan the ground, identifying the boundaries of the trap.

He picked his wand up and pointed it at her. It was a long range shot but worth a try. He cast *Petrificus Totalus* , and smiled as it flew straight toward the small red-haired girl.

At the last second, Ginny dropped to the floor and rolled, pulling her wand out.

The curse hit one of the other Aurors behind her.

Ernie pointed directly at him, and a few of the others started to run toward him.

He could see Ginny tell them to stop, but they didn’t; they wanted to be the ones to capture Harry Potter.

Or, more correctly, as they soon found out, be the ones captured by Harry Potter. The five running Aurors suddenly vanished, as they fell into a large hole. He grinned; they would be in free-fall for around twenty minutes, before reappearing in front of Mad-Eye and Kingsley.

As they knew he was here, he cancelled the camouflage spell and stood. Then, with a cocky salute to Ginny, he turned and stepped into the forest, as the expected barrage of spells was launched at his back.

Still, that was ten Aurors down, and with Marietta sitting out this half of the exercise, only nineteen to go. He expected a lot better from these ones. They were ex D.A. members, Tonks, and a couple of others. They were the best of the best – well, supposedly anyway.

He cast the radar spell again, smiling when he got nothing back. He nodded to himself; they'd obviously found a way to block it; good, it meant that they were finally thinking.

He moved to his right. He needed to get behind them now, because they would be expecting him to continue to be defensive. And predictable was the last thing he wanted to be.

He ran over to another of his Huge Hole traps and jumped, catching the edge of the hole, hanging from the far edge, his hands hidden by the grass. He was counting on them being good enough to spot it and to avoid it.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on slowing his breathing. He couldn't cast a charm to hide himself, unfortunately, as the chameleon charm would react with the magic of the hole, and light him up like a Christmas tree.

"I've found another one," he heard Tonks say. "Over here."

"This way is clear," Ginny replied. "Give it a wide berth. And remind me to *personally* thank Fred and George later with something gruesome."

"Will do," Tonks said with a laugh.

"And for Merlin's sake, don't trip!"

He could hear Tonks grumbling under her breath as she turned and walked to the other side.

He waited another minute, and then pulled himself out, absently shaking his arms to get some blood back into them.

The Aurors had now entered the wooded area. All of them were walking slowly, scanning for traps as they went.

He hadn't bothered to set any up – it would have been too predictable. And as they were moving slowly, he could ghost behind them and take a few of them out.

Forgoing magic, he crept up behind the rear Auror and pulled out a large hunting knife. He held it to the Auror's throat. "Don't they tell you to always check your rear?" he whispered.

"Damn it," the Auror whispered. "How the hell did you get behind us?"

Harry smiled, walking the Auror backward and out of sight. "I jumped into one of my traps and hung from the edge."

The Auror shook his head slowly. "I'm glad there's only one of you."

"That's the problem," Harry whispered intently. "If this were real, I might not be alone. If this were real, you'd be dead along with ten of your colleagues."

The Auror gulped. “Sorry, sir,” he muttered.

Harry sighed. “You’re out of the game, so go back to the base and think about what I said.” He pocketed his knife and moved back into the forest, repeating the process another three times.

It was the halfway point, and he’d taken out half of them. It was all going to plan, so far. He stood behind a tree and grinned as the Aurors regrouped.

“Damn it,” Ginny said. “Where the hell is everyone else?”

“Harry must have got them,” Tonks offered.

“So, now he must be behind us? I thought we were scanning for him as we went?”

“We were,” Ernie sighed. “And more than likely, we walked right past him.”

“Enough of that,” Ginny snapped. “Yes, he’s good, but we’re better. There *is* only one of him.”

“No, Ginny, he’s *not* alone,” Ernie snapped back. “We’re facing Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, Bill, Charlie, Sumi, Fleur, and Merlin knows who else Harry has roped in for advice. Harry never works alone; that’s what makes him so hard to beat. They might not be standing next to him, but I can read their patterns in all of this. When you combine those resources with his natural ability, you have someone who isn’t going to go down easily.”

Ernie took another deep breath. “But we can beat him. We need to stop fighting each other and concentrate on this. Ginny, you know him best, you’re in charge. Tonks, you’re number two. We’ll follow orders.”

Harry made a mental note to exclude Ernie from a lot of the talks he would be having later. The young man seemed to understand more than the others what was happening – and that sort of skill might be more valuable behind a desk, rather than as a field agent.

“Okay,” Ginny said. “Harry is a sneaky bastard. Whatever we are expecting is probably wrong. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if he was listening to us now.”

Harry smiled to himself.

“But we are half-way to the flag, and we still have half of us. We need to take advantage of the fact that there is only one of him. He can’t be in several places at once. So, we’ll separate into three teams. One will go left, one right, and the other straight on. Tonks, you have the second, Zach, you’ve got the third.

“I’ll go straight; Tonks, left; Zach, right. Okay? And don’t forget to watch your back; we don’t know where he is!”

The other Aurors voiced their agreement and separated.

Harry was pleased; this was much more like it. They were coming at him from three sides, they were checking their rear, and as he watched, they were still scanning for traps.

He pulled out a limited edition Canary Crème from his pocket and swallowed it. This was a second generation sweet from Fred and George, and it allowed some limited control over your actions while you were a bird and it lasted longer. He quickly flew high into the air, over the advancing Aurors, and landed down behind the cabin.

He had to wait another few minutes for the spell to wear off, before he climbed through the window and stopped to find his opponents.

Zach's team was out; at least for the moment. One of them had disturbed a curse Bill had taught him, and they were now engaged in a pitched battle with fifteen enraged Mummies. This curse had been used to protect the tomb of Semerkhet, one of the earliest known Pharaohs.

Tonks and Ginny's teams had both lost members, but were still coming on strong.

This was much more impressive from them. The traps he'd laid out were fiendish, difficult to detect, and placed just where they weren't expected. He wouldn't have been surprised if he had managed to defeat all of them, but he hadn't.

Both groups had to pass one final trap, before they would have to duel him. *If* they got through it.

He walked out of the cabin with a chair and waited – the need for stealth now gone.

He absently tapped his wand against his teeth. Both groups had discovered the final trap. It was now up to them to see if they could find the one way past it.

It was Ernie who worked it out first. The young man had tried pretty much every way to get over or around it, and nothing had worked. He turned and offered Harry a faint salute, before casually pushing his friend into the goo-filled trench.

The Auror in question screamed a few choice words that made him very glad that Sammy wasn't listening, before Ernie stood on the Aurors head and jumped further into the trap.

“Come on then, Ginny,” Ernie called. “And don't bloody fall.”

As quickly as a cat, Ginny lightly used the trapped Aurors as stepping stones to get to the other side.

“There are no more traps, Ginny,” Harry said. “You've reached the end.”

“Thank Merlin,” Ginny replied in relief.

He turned to watch Tonks, who made her own way across, before moving to stand next to Ginny.

“The flag's in there,” Harry nodded to the door next to him.

“And we have to get past you?” Ginny asked.

Harry got to his feet and bowed to them. “You did much better this afternoon,” he said cheerfully. “Much more how I expect the best to act.”

“But it doesn’t make up for this morning, right, Harry?” Tonks asked.

“Correct. You were arrogant, sloppy and lazy. Not a good combination.”

“So, one at a time or both together?” Ginny asked.

“You’re the ones attacking me,” Harry grinned. “Why are you asking the opponent?”

Ginny and Tonks looked at each, and both raised their wands.

Harry was faster; diving to his left, he cast a banishing charm at Tonks, who tried to duck, but couldn’t, and ended up flat on her back in the goo.

Ginny moved away from the edge and started to circle, casting spells at him randomly.

He blocked them casually, recognising them for what they were; a distraction.

“You can’t win, you know that, don’t you, Ginny?” he taunted. It wasn’t true. He would be very hard pressed to beat her in a fair fight, but he had no intention to fight fair.

“Talk to me, Harry,” Ginny said, firing a stunning charm followed by a cutting curse.

He dodged the first and sidestepped the second. This was where his training with Charlie was really going to come in. He was going to do his best to make Ginny angry and do something stupid. “Nice cutting curse,” he grinned. “Probably would have hurt if it had touched me.”

“No *probably* about it, Potter,” Ginny growled.

“Potter?” Harry mocked, sending a tickling charm at her, knowing it would irritate her if she didn’t think he was taking her seriously. “How very formal.”

“A tickling charm? Fight me, you git.”

“Why?” Harry asked, taking a seat.

Ginny threw a couple of curses at him that came very close to breaking his shield. This was one of the downsides to making her angry; her curses took on a lot more power.

Ginny grabbed her wand with both hands and poured her magic into a powerful curse he didn’t recognise. He didn’t hang around to see if it would defeat his shield. He jumped to his feet, vaulted the spell, and crashed straight into Ginny – who was still recovering from the spell she had cast – throwing them both through the door to the cabin. His landing knocked the wind out him as

he'd landed his stomach on her raised knee, but he still managed to wrestle her wand from her, and threw it, along with his, back out the door and into the goo.

Ginny pushed him off her and jumped to her feet.

Harry climbed slowly up, trying to breathe deeply. "You should have attacked when I was on the floor," he told her smugly.

Ginny closed her eyes. "You're playing with me, aren't you," she said flatly.

Harry nodded. "You lost your temper because you didn't think I was taking you seriously."

Ginny sighed. "This has been so easy for you, hasn't it?"

He shrugged slowly. "I wouldn't have lasted five minutes without everyone else behind me."

Ginny turned away for a moment. When she faced him again, she reached up and wiped a tear out from her eye. "Damn it," she cursed. "This was supposed to impress you."

"What?" Harry asked.

"You think it was easy acting like a bitch to my family for the better part of a year?"

"What?" Harry said again, moving back against the side of the cabin.

Ginny started to pace up and down the other side of the cabin, raising her arms dramatically. "I figured that this way I could get your undivided attention. Oh, it was easy to persuade the others to wipe Kingsley out playing poker – a couple of days after I placed the idea of a training session in his mind. Knowing how close you two are, it was obvious he'd ask you to help, and with my family, I knew they would help."

"You mean you arranged all of this?"

"I *orchestrated* this," she hissed. "I was going to *beat* you, *impress* you, and finally get some *time* with you alone."

"Ginny," Harry started.

"Wait, let me finish."

"But," Harry tried again.

"Please, Harry, let me finish. I arranged all of this to get you alone; at least, let me say what I need to."

"You manipulated me, all of us?" Harry said, giving in.

“Grow up, Harry,” Ginny said, but her voice had no malice in it. “How else am I supposed to get you alone?”

“You could try visiting,” Harry said acidly.

Ginny turned and fixed him with a stern glare. “Visiting you? Do you have any idea how long I’ve been *trying* to visit you? I turn up at your house, and you’re in Singapore, or Sweden, or Australia or Merlin knows where. I talk to my darling brother, who mentions that you are in Amsterdam, so I visit there on my weekend off only to find that you’re in Mexico. And when you are at least in the country, you’re at Ron’s or Hermione’s and I invariably try the wrong one, and by the time I’m through the wards you like to put up everywhere you go, it’s too bloody late to try the other.

“I tried to gatecrash your movie nights with Kingsley – and I even brought Muggle ice cream, and you two were at the bloody cinema.

“I try sending you a letter and my bloody owl can’t even find you.”

Harry winced. “Sorry about that,” he mumbled. “I forgot to tell you how to get around that.”

“I know,” Ginny said icily. “And when I asked the members of my loving family I got the same response – that *you* have to tell me personally, as Hermione adjusted the *Fidelius* charm for your personal use.”

“You could have talked to me at the family parties,” Harry offered.

Ginny placed both her hands on her hips and glared at him even harder.

“I have tried,” she said through gritted teeth. “But your bloody bodyguard won’t let me anywhere near you. And whenever we started to talk, she would interfere.”

“My bodyguard?” Harry asked, now completely lost. “What bodyguard?”

“Your three and a half foot tall, seven year old Veela bodyguard who goes by the name of Samantha!” Ginny spat. “If I hadn’t seen her run to get to you, I’d swear that her legs were broken with the amount of time she spends being carried around in your arms.

“And the last time I tried to talk to you to get you alone,” Ginny’s tone turned to one of outrage, “that *child* turned into a bird and shot fireballs at me!”

Harry’s lips twitched. He desperately tried to keep a straight face. He tried to think of Hermione teaching him applied mathematics. He tried every mental trick he could think off, but none of them worked.

A giggle escaped, and once it was gone, he couldn’t help but start to laugh. He slumped to the floor and gave in.

“Ginny Weasley, the big, bad Auror foiled by a seven year old?”

“Yes, laugh it up,” Ginny sighed as she slumped to the floor next to him. “I was desperate, okay? I just wanted to find a way of getting you alone.”

“Well, as much as I hate to say it,” Harry sighed, “and I did try and warn you, remember? This is hardly alone.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your entire family and most of the Aurors are watching this on the magical equivalent of a big screen TV.”

“Bugger,” Ginny moaned.

Harry nodded in agreement. “We thought it would be a good idea to record it so that we could go over it later and show everyone what went wrong – use it as a training video.”

“Can we at least go somewhere and talk before I have to face them?” Ginny begged. “Please, Harry, I’m feeling humiliated enough as it is.”

Harry rolled to his feet and offered her his hand. She took it, and he pulled her up. He winked at her. “*Accio Wands*,” he mumbled. The two wands flew out of the Goo and into his hands. “And that’s the grand total of my wandless magic,” he said with a slight grin, before he Apparated them away.

“Okay,” Charlie said slowly. “What the hell was that all about?”

“Don’t ask me,” Kingsley said, shaking his head. “I’d forgotten she’d suggested this.”

“I, too, am perplexed,” Percy added. “But I do find it reassuring to know that our sister isn’t going down the same path I did.”

“True,” Fred said. “Penelope, dear, help?”

“I think it’s obvious,” Penelope said with a slight smile. “Ginny wants to tell Harry how she feels.”

“Still?” Fred asked. “I thought she was over that.”

“So did I,” Hermione added.

“Obviously not,” Molly smiled, before she turned to Charlie and Fleur.

“Is this going to cause problems?”

Fleur and Charlie looked at each other, and both seemed to be trying not to laugh.

“Big problems,” Fleur grinned. “As far as Samantha is concerned, Harry is *her* boyfriend. She knows that Harry doesn’t think of her that way, but she doesn’t care. She believes that Harry belongs to her.

“And the other day, Samantha told me that she doesn’t like Ginny, because Ginny is always being mean to her. Which, I suspect has a lot more to do with Samantha realising that Ginny likes Harry, than any actual meanness on Ginny’s part.”

“Great,” Ron sighed. “I’m used to Hermione and Sumi being more perceptive than I am. I’m even used to Bill, Charlie, and the Twins. But now I’ve got a seven year old noticing things I haven’t,” he finished with a grin.

There was a round of laughter from the others.

Kingsley groaned softly. “The movie night was my fault. I forgot it was my turn to pick up the video, so we had to go out.”

“Did anyone ever mention that we have a private Floo network?” Bill asked.

“And Amsterdam was my fault,” Percy admitted. “I forgot that Ginny was going out there when I asked Harry to go to Mexico and give them advice on how to deal with their terrorist problems.”

“And I’m guessing that none of us bothered to tell our Auror sister the easy way around the wards?” Fred asked.

George sniggered and then gave into a full-on laugh. “Oh, this *is* priceless,” he said. “Ginny’s been going nuts, trying to get hold of someone who appears impossible to track down, and she reacts like a true Weasley.”

“In a baroque, over the top manner?” Hermione asked dryly.

“Exactly,” Fred and George said together.

“Okay, enough talk,” Molly said firmly. “Kingsley, you have some Aurors waiting for you. Fred and George, clean up the food. Then everyone back to the Burrow so we can talk about this in comfort.”

“Where are we?” Ginny asked, as they appeared in a large building.

“Heathrow,” Harry said and looked at his watch. “Come on, we’ve not got much time.”

“Time for what?”

“No time to talk, hurry,” Harry said, as he started to run down the corridor.

Ginny followed him, feeling a little bewildered.

“Steve,” Harry called ahead. “Can we still get through?”

The person in charge of the International Floo paused in what he was doing and looked at his watch.

“You’ll be cutting it close.”

Harry smiled at him. “I know; we’ll risk it.”

“I’ll need her papers, though.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll clear it at the other end,” Harry said confidently.

“If you weren’t Harry bloody Potter,” Steve groaned.

“But I am,” Harry agreed. “Come on, Ginny.”

Ginny shook her head and stepped into the Floo with him, completely missing the destination he shouted out.

They arrived into bright sunlight and in front of a surprised looking official. The language Harry was speaking was not one she recognised, and when the guard stared at her, she tried to smile, suddenly very aware that she was still in the dirty uniform she’d worn all day, and that her hair was a mess.

The official smiled at Harry, shook his hand, and waved them through.

“That was close,” Harry sighed in relief, taking her hand and pulling her through the lounge and outside to the beach. “It’s lunch time here and they always close the International Floo.”

“Where are we?” Ginny asked, squinting her eyes into the bright sunlight.

“The beach,” Harry said cheerfully, still pulling her along.

“Harry, wait,” she cried, trying to stop.

“Wait?” he asked. “There’s no time to wait. We’ve got a deadline to meet.”

“What?” Ginny tried again, as she was dragged into a shop.

Harry walked straight over to a rack of dresses, looked her up and down, and pulled one down. “Go try this on.”

“But!”

“No buts, we’re in a hurry!” Harry said, his grin starting to really irritate her. Before she knew

what she was doing, she was inside the dressing room removing her uniform.

“Cast a Showering spell,” Harry called.

“A what?” Ginny asked.

She heard Harry groan, and then the door opened slightly, and his wand pointed at her. “Wait,” she called as she realised what he was about to do. This whole thing had a sense of overwhelming unreality about it. She finished removing her clothes, and called, “Done.”

Harry cast the spell, and she felt like she was being hit from all sides by a heavy spray of water. There was a brief sensation of being massaged, before the spell ended. She looked down and blinked. She was now very clean, and, she sniffed -- more fragrant than she had been.

“Here,” Harry called and threw some white lingerie over the door and pushed some sandals under it. “And hurry!”

In a strange way, she almost felt like she was under the *Imperio* us as she pulled on the lingerie and the dress. She looked in the mirror and froze.

Exactly how did Harry know what size she wore? Everything fit, right down to the cup size of the built-in bra. She slipped on the sandals, which were also the right size. Apart from her hair, which was still pulled back in a ponytail, she looked good. The light green dress suited her skin and hair combination and the sandals matched.

She stepped out, to find him waiting for her, tapping his wand against his teeth. He’d changed clothes as well and was wearing a pair of white trousers that came to mid-calf and a deep blue shirt. He smiled at her, and turned to the shopkeeper, pulling out his wallet. There was a short negotiation, before he handed over a card. A signature later, he took her hand again.

“What about my uniform?”

“Alexo will have it sent to our hotel,” Harry explained, as he dragged her out of the shop.

“What hotel?”

“Not now, we’ve not got time!”

Ginny stopped dead in the street. “I’m not taking another step until you tell me what is going on!”

“Fine,” Harry groaned. He pointed his wand at her and muttered under his breath, freezing her in place. He picked her up and started to run down the road.

She groaned audibly. “Harry!”

“You’re the one who said you weren’t going to take another step, now be quiet. I can’t talk, run and carry you at the same time.”

Ginny struggled to keep her temper; he was being incredibly high-handed with her, ordering her about, and now forcing her to go somewhere she wasn't sure she wanted to go.

She looked around as he continued to run down a pier. There was a large yacht that was travelling alongside the pier, and Harry didn't slow, as he launched them both through the air and onto the back of it.

"Hi," Harry grinned to the surprised tuxedo-wearing man. "Table for two?"

The man sighed and held up his hands. "We are full, Mr Potter."

"Nonsense," Harry grinned. "There's always room for two more."

The man shook his head and started to mutter under his breath. "The things we do for you," he grumbled.

"Thanks," Harry grinned and placed Ginny down. "We'll be on the foredeck having a drink."

"I'll call you when I can," the Maitre'D said.

Harry absently removed the spell on her, allowing her to move again, and led her down the side of the boat to a bar. The bar was packed with people, all of whom looked to a well manicured man to be rather rich. "Wait here," Harry said.

She was now feeling very out of place, and she watched, as he weaved his way through the crowd of people. He reached the front and managed to snag a barkeeper immediately – to the chagrin of the people who had been queuing. A note changed hands, and Harry returned with a bright red drink and a bottle.

"Come on," he said and made his way to the front of the boat. There was a velvet rope portioning off one area, but Harry just undid and stepped through, taking one of the only two remaining sun loungers. He stretched out and grinned up at her, placing the drinks on a table.

Ginny stood and glared at him.

"Feeling frustrated?" he asked. "Annoyed that someone has just whipped you half way across the world and not told you anything?"

"Yes," she growled.

Harry's eyes suddenly seemed to change, losing the warmth and the humour.

"It's not nice, is it?" he said in a low voice. "When everything is taken out of your hands, and you're forced to do things you'd rather not, and go places you don't want to go. It leaves you feeling powerless and used. It makes you angry and frustrated. And the fact that it's done for someone else's purposes makes it worse, doesn't it?"

Ginny gaped at him and then slowly started to blush.

“Sit,” Harry said casually. “Lunch won’t be for another hour.”

Ginny bit her lower lip, suddenly realising that she might have bitten off more than she could chew. For some reason, she hadn’t reconciled adult Harry with being, well, an adult. Despite knowing about the whole Cho and Draco thing, and despite knowing that he had spent years abroad, she hadn’t really thought about how that would affect his confidence and his ability to deal with problems.

She wasn’t sure about these rapid mood changes either. She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” she said, hoping that a direct apology would help.

He looked at her and motioned her to sit. She did so.

“You could have contacted me any number of ways,” he said softly. “So, why the charade?”

She blushed and looked down. “It seemed like a good idea at the time,” she said meekly. “I was desperate, Harry, and I wasn’t thinking straight. After striking out each time I tried to get to you, it became an obsession in my head, you know? It was a challenge to get through to you in a dramatic fashion.”

Harry took a sip from the bottle, “Cho said something remarkably similar,” he said, causing her to blanch. “And I’ll say to you what I said to her. You’ll find that talking to people goes a lot further than stupid schemes.”

Ginny nodded and took her drink, sipping it gently, not sure what to say now. This really hadn’t been how she had planned the day at all.

“The Cayman Islands,” he said eventually.

“Excuse me?”

“We’re floating on one of the best kept secrets in the Cayman Islands in the Caribbean, just off Seven Mile Beach. At the moment, the crew are catching the fish that they will then fresh cook for us. It is simply the best sea food anywhere on the planet.”

“You come here a lot, then?”

Harry laughed softly. “What gave it away?” he teased. “The fact that I act like I own the place, or the fact that I was using magic in a public street?”

“Shouldn’t I be arresting you for that?” Ginny asked.

“Not unless the Ministry has declared war on the Cayman Islands,” he snorted. “We’re not in Britain, and not under British law, Ginny. Things are rather different out here. Muggles and Wizards live together quite happily. Of course, everyone avoids the tourist areas.”

“Oh,” Ginny said quietly. “What is this?”

“A Cosmopolitan,” Harry replied. “Vodka, Cointreau and cranberry juice.”

Ginny sipped it again and tried to relax. Here she was, on a beautiful yacht, sipping cocktails with Harry Potter, and she felt like a twelve year old with a crush and a remarkable ability to insert her sandaled foot into her mouth.

“So,” Harry asked after another long pause. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“I really don’t think this could possibly have gone worse,” Ginny sighed and took another sip of the drink. “The general idea for today was to impress you, and then ask you out on a date.”

“Why did you think you had to impress me?”

“Because not all of us have your self-confidence,” Ginny said, suddenly deciding that she physically couldn’t get any more humiliated, so she may as well tell the truth.

“I’ve seen the Prophet’s Harry Potter photo specials over the years, and seen the sort of girl you normally date. You seem to have a preference for tall, leggy, suntanned brunettes. As you may or may not have noticed, I’m short, pale and red-haired.”

“Are you trying to spread your legs for a one night stand with me?” Harry asked. “A lot of trouble to go through for that.”

“No,” Ginny said, feeling herself blush. “Not the one-night part.”

“Then why compare yourself to girls I went with for that reason?”

Ginny felt herself heating up ever more. “Look,” she blurted. “Harry, will you please go on a date with me? I’d like to see if we can be something more than friends, alright?”

There was a silence that seemed to last forever.

“Okay.”

“What?” she asked, shaking her head, not sure that she had heard him correctly.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll go on a date with you.”

“What... why?”

He sat up suddenly and turned, facing her. “Because, finally, you just asked me directly, without getting side-tracked, and without trying to manipulate me. You just asked.

“That gave me the option of saying yes or no, depending on how I feel. It’s called respect, Ginny, and you finally gave me some.”

“Oh,” Ginny replied slowly.

“So,” Harry grinned. “Drink up; our table will be free in a minute, and we can have our first date.”

Ginny took another sip, and placed the drink down. She was already feeling a little light-headed, and she didn’t want to get drunk.

He moved forward and lightly kissed her, pulling back before she could do anything but stare at him in surprise.

He grinned at her, “Yes, it’s a date,” he said decisively.

She shook her head again. Maybe it hadn’t been such a bad day after all.

“So, how did you know what size dress to get me?”

He raised the bottle to his lips, taking a long drink, before grinning at her. “Do you really want to know the answer?”

“No,” she said slowly. “I think that’s one of the things that I really don’t need to know.”

“Wise choice,” Harry smiled.

Harry moved around the kitchen slowly, cooking a meal for two, while he waited for his guest to arrive.

The date with Ginny had gone well. Once she got over her shock, it had been nice to spend time with her. And he’d even kissed her again before saying goodnight.

He was pretty sure she would have been open for a little more, but he wasn’t at the moment.

He’d known what Ginny had wanted to ask him as soon as she had stopped fighting and started talking in the cabin, but he wanted to know *why*, and wanted to give her a chance to explain. It was part of growing up, of being more mature about things, even about being manipulated.

He could have sulked about it, but that would have been self-defeating, and just recently, he had started to really enjoy life again.

Sure, Ginny wasn’t a leggy sun-tanned brunette; in fact, he’d had to cast some pretty strong charms to stop her from being burnt on the yacht, but she was pretty enough, definitely good in a fight, and she didn’t bore him, and that was quite an important plus point in her favour.

He could talk to her, and while she wasn’t used to his jet-set lifestyle, she soon would be, or maybe he would settle down for a bit. He didn’t know and he didn’t really care either. As much as everyone had welcomed this relationship, a lot of people seemed to be taking it too seriously,

too fast.

He had no intention of falling in love quickly; if it happened, it happened; if not, it didn't. He just wanted to have some fun finding out.

Maybe this was what being an adult was about; thinking things through, forming relationships, and maybe, no longer being alone.

But now, he had a more difficult conversation to handle.

How to tell a seven year old that he was dating Ginny.

It wasn't one he was looking forward to.

There was the sound of feet running rapidly through his house, and he moved away from the cooker.

"Uncle Harry!" Sammy yelled, launching herself at him in her traditional greeting.

He caught her in midair and hugged her tightly. "Hey, short-stuff."

"I've grown a quarter of an inch!" Sammy stated proudly.

"So I'm going to have to stop calling you short-stuff," Harry agreed.

"Do I get a goodbye?" Fleur asked dryly from the door to his kitchen.

Sammy waved from Harry's arms.

"I'll pick her up in the morning?"

"Sure," Harry agreed.

"Where have you been recently, Uncle Harry?" Sammy asked, her mother already forgotten.

"The Cayman Islands," Harry replied.

"Have we put a flag on that?"

"I don't think so."

"Then we need to do that, right now," Sammy said decisively. She wiggled out of his arms, took his hand, and dragged him across the kitchen to his office.

Harry shot a wink at Fleur, who followed them.

On one wall was a large map of the earth, and in just about every country was a small flag. Fleur walked to one side, and as she touched the flag on New Zealand, it expanded

“New Zealand, population four million Muggles, one hundred thousand wizards. Became a British territory in 1840. The native people fought a series of wars until they were defeated in 1872. Became an independent dominion in 1907,” Sammy recited instantly.

“Harry spent two weeks there last year. The first week was dealing with a Maori wizard who was attacking Muggles, the second week sight-seeing.”

“I’m impressed,” Fleur said softly. “And you know every flag on here?”

Sammy nodded proudly. “It’s why I’m top at Geography at school,” she said. “The other kids don’t understand why I’m into Muggle subjects, but Harry says that only idiots and Ministry officials ignore the rest of the world.”

Fleur laughed. “Well, you two have fun.”

“We will,” Sammy said confidently. “So, Uncle Harry, how many people live in the Cayman Islands? And what were you doing there?”

Harry lifted her up so that she could place a flag into the map.

“About 50,000 people, of which about 6,000 are Wizards.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of wizards and witches,” Sammy said. “And what were you doing there?”

“That,” Harry sighed, “is a question best answered in the living room.”

When they were settled on the couch, with Sammy leaning against him, Sammy asked again, “Why were you in the Cayman Islands?”

“Aunt Ginny wanted to talk to me,” he said directly, meeting her eyes.

She seemed to freeze for a second. “Really?” she asked, her voice wavering as she tried to control herself.

He nodded. “She wanted to ask me out,” he clarified.

“What did you say?” There was now a break in her voice, but she met his eyes directly.

“That I would have to speak to the most important girl in my life first,” he replied softly.

Sammy looked down for a second, before she looked up again and met his eyes. “Do you like Aunt Ginny?”

“Well,” Harry said thoughtfully. “She’s not my normal type, but she is quite pretty, and she’s not boring.”

Sammy looked down at the floor. “I knew it,” she whispered. “I knew she liked you, but I wanted

you to like me.”

“I do like you,” Harry said.

“But not like that,” Sammy said accusingly.

“No,” Harry agreed.

“I won’t be young forever,” Sammy pointed out. “I’m growing up every day.”

“So am I, Sammy; I’ll always be twenty years older than you.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Sammy protested. “You’re the bestest wizard in the world, you’re going to live for a very long time, and you’ll need someone younger to be able to live all that time with you.”

Harry blinked; he hadn’t expected this argument from her. In fact, he wouldn’t have expected this argument from anyone. No one had ever said anything even remotely similar to him.

“You’ll want someone closer to your age,” he pointed out, already knowing that she was going to refute that point as well.

She snorted eloquently, and he couldn’t help smiling.

“Sammy,” he said softly, deciding that he had tried to beat around the bush too much, and she deserved the respect of him telling her directly, “I love you, but you will always be the daughter of two of my closest friends. You will always be a girl I love, but that I am never in love with.”

“Not even when I grow up?” she asked in a tiny voice. “Not even when I grow boobs and I can do the things that boys like?”

He really didn’t want to know how she knew what boys liked. He then wondered if he needed to pay a visit to her school to make sure her male friends weren’t doing or saying anything inappropriate. He shook himself mentally; he was getting off track here. “No,” he said softly. “I’m sorry.”

She looked at him, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “But I want you to,” she whispered. “I want you to wait for me and marry me.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

“Mummy said that you didn’t like me like that,” she mumbled, the tears now falling down her cheek. “But she said I was allowed to pretend. I told her I knew it was going to be Aunt Ginny.”

“You did?”

She nodded. “A Veela can tell, even a little one,” she sighed. She looked at him. “Are you going

to forget about me now?"

"Huh?"

"When you're with Aunt Ginny? It will be different, and I won't be first anymore, and I'll have lost my best friend." He had to strain to hear her voice. The look on her face almost broke his heart.

He shook his head. "It will be different," he agreed carefully. "But do you remember what I said? I love you, Sammy, and no one, not even Ginny, can ever make me forget that."

"Do you promise?" she asked, now looking very much like a lost eight year old.

"Of course I do," he said honestly.

"What if I really, really, really didn't want you to date her?"

He reached out and lightly stroked her hair back. "Do you have a good reason why I shouldn't?"

She met his eyes and slowly shook her head. "No, Uncle Harry, I don't want you to be lonely anymore."

"I'm not," he replied. "I've got friends and family, but I would like a girlfriend as well. And you know, if Aunt Ginny is with me, it means that you can come on holiday with us."

She smiled a little. "Where to?"

"Anywhere you like."

"Australia?"

He nodded.

"Okay," she said, sniffing and wiping her eyes. "You can date Aunt Ginny, you can even fall in love with her, but I get to throw fireballs at her if she hurts you."

"Deal," Harry laughed. "Now, why don't we go eat?"

"It's not going to be healthy, is it?"

He laughed softly. "Of course not; it's even got wine in it."

She hugged him tightly. "I love you, Uncle Harry."

"I love you too, Sammy."