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# The Obligatory Marriage Law Fic

## Chapter 1

### Standard Disclaimer:

Alyx bolted out of her sound sleep and looked around warily. It had been months since she had visited the theater and she was surprised to find herself back in familiar surroundings.

"This isn't Orgrimmar," she muttered in confusion.

"No it isn't," Bob said from behind her.

Alyx screeched and leaped five feet straight up. Bob, being the wise rogue faded from view again.

Landing she looking around anxiously. "So what are we doing here?"

"New story," came a whispered reply. "We needed to make sure we had the Marriage Law Fic ticket punched. It's part of the new FFAA rules."

Alyx sighed and shook her head. "More rules! I don't know if I can take more rules. First they took away our llamas, then the emu and bobo the dancing bear."

Suddenly she smiled brightly. "I know, we can get Alan Rickman to give the disclaimer!"

"No we can't," replied the voice from the darkness.

"Well for one thing he's busy giving a disclaimer over on Fan Fiction dot net and for another, he probably won't talk to you."

"Why wouldn't he?" Alyx protested. "All I want is for him to show up and say we don't own Harry Potter in that sexy voice of his!"

The stage flooded with lights and Alyx blinked in the glare. She could barely make out the hundreds of people sitting in the audience staring at her.

"Well for one thing, you're dressed in bunny pajamas," whispered the voice. "It's rather revealing, and you're wearing it on stage. Rickman would probably think you're a stalker."

Alyx squeaked when she realized her attire. It didn't help matters that at that precise moment, elsewhere, Alan Rickman was hot tubbing it with an author of a slash story linking Snape and Dumbledore in a threeway BDSM story involving a clown and twenty two goldfish.

Harry turned to Bob who sat in the front row. "You do that to her a lot don't you?"

Bob shrugged. "Why not? I do write the disclaimers after all. At least I didn't bring back the Dolly Llama or Snickers the singing goat."

"What about that other story, you know the mutant one?"

Bob shrugged. "We'll get back to it eventually. This and some of the other little one shots are needed to help clear out writing throats so to speak. In the meantime here is the;

### Obligatory Marriage Law Fic

#### The Black Tower...

Ginny Weasley sighed heavily and stared at the imposing structure. It had been built shortly after the war ended and housed only a single occupant.

She didn't want to be there, but her bosses had pressed her into service for the task. They felt she was the one person who was least likely to invoke the wrath of the owner of the Black Tower.

She had news to deliver and hoped the recipient wouldn't kill the messenger.

She placed her hand on the heavy iron gate and pushed. It slid open silently, indifferent to her passage.

Indifferent; a word that could be used to describe the structure's owner very well.

The war had ended badly for everyone. Harry had managed to kill Voldemort, but as part of a last ditch effort, the Dark Lord had invoked a curse that affected a significant portion of the wizarding population. Voldemort's intent was simple; if he couldn't rule the wizarding world, he'd destroy it.

It had been five years since the war ended. A year later, the owner of the tower had gone into seclusion. The exact details of the former Dark Lord's plot had only come to light in the last year, however.

Ginny paused and pushed down the angry thoughts that were running through her mind. She knew without a single doubt that she played a major part in what had happened. She had been young and easily overwhelmed by the aftermath of the war. His fame was like an intoxicating wine to her and she reveled in it. She insisted they attend the parties and events in his honor, all the while ignoring Harry Potter, the man, because Harry Potter, the hero, led such a marvelous life.

Hermione had tried to warn her, tried to explain that she was pushing Harry away instead of helping him. But she hadn't listened to the older witch. Hermione had, in her own way, tried her best to help Harry, but the process was inexorable. Bit by bit, Harry had separated himself from everything and everyone.

Ginny knew her own actions had placed a serious strain on Ron's relationship with Hermione.

Ginny sighed again and shook her head ruefully over what might have been. Her blindness had caused the Weasleys much pain in the intervening five years. Ron and Hermione had married three years after the war had ended, as Hermione insisted that Ron still needed to grow up. She refused his offer until he'd done so.

Hermione was home now, under healer care and in her sixth month of pregnancy. Ron and Hermione were lucky, being one of the few pre-established couples to have escaped Voldemort's curse. For a majority of the wizarding world, sterility had become common place.

The curse, uttered in haste by Voldemort, was flawed. In wishing to destroy the wizarding world, the Dark Lord had actually destroyed only part of that world; the pure bloods.

It was now known that every pure blood marriage would be childless. For a pure blood to have a child, he or she had to marry a half blood or muggle-born.

And that was why Ginny found herself standing outside Black Tower.

To call the structure imposing would be an understatement. No one was sure how Harry had managed to get it built, but it rose several hundred meters above a valley floor, on land owned by the Potter family for hundreds of years. Few external features were visible; a door, a few windows near the top and that was it. On a few occasions, adventurous reporters had tried to approach the building on brooms, only to discover it was heavily warded. The only safe approach was on foot, and even that wasn't guaranteed.

She took another breath and approached the door. It was featureless, except for the knob. The lack of knocker was an indication that the man who lived there did not want visitors.

To her surprise, the door swung open before she could lay a hand on it.

"The Master does not wish to be disturbed," said a small house elf that Ginny didn't recognize. The elf was dressed in a miniature butler suit and he carried a self important air about him. He was unlike any elf she had ever met.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I must insist on seeing him," Ginny replied firmly. "The Ministry of Magic has enacted a new law and I am here to inform him of his options. If he doesn't see me, I'm sure the next visit from the Ministry will be from those in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

The elf tilted his head as if listening to instructions only he could hear, then he nodded slightly.

"Very well, Miss. If you will follow me, I will take you to the visitor's room."

Ginny nodded and moved into the hallway. The small elf turned and led her down the long corridor. Behind her the front door closed silently.

She was confused; the corridor looked far longer than it could possibly be. It took her another moment to realize that there was some substantial magic going on in the tower. They passed dozens of unremarkable doors before finally stopping at one that seemed no different than any of the others.

When it opened on its own, she took a deep breath and entered the room.

"The Master will be along shortly," said the self. Then, after a slight bow, he turned and exited the room, closing the door behind him.

Inside the room were two armchairs and a fireplace. The room lacked any sort of personalization. There was no warmth or welcome and nothing of the man who lived in the tower. She remembered then what the elf called it; The visitor's room. It was a room for unwelcome guests.

Nervously, she sat down on one of the chairs and stared into the darkened fireplace, recalling the last time she had spoken to Harry. They had fought because he had turned down an invitation to a ball in his honor held by the Shepard family. It had been the fifth invitation that month that he had refused to attend.

Though she didn't know it at the time, he had already been deep into the construction of his tower. She had mistakenly suspected his daily absences were due to him seeing another woman and had accused him of such. There had been a moment of total and absolute silence on both their parts, then he had spun on his heels and walked out of the room.

She had stood there, stunned by his reaction and her own stupidity. She knew Harry well enough to know he'd never cheat on her, and yet she had allowed her temper to run unchecked.

By the time she shook herself from the shock of what she had done, he was gone. Gone from her room, gone from the Burrow, gone from the Weasley family and gone from the wizarding world. He had entered his tower that day and hadn't been seen in public since.

The fight was only the prelude to the apocalyptic fight that followed once Hermione learned what had happened. No one loved Harry like Hermione did. To her, he was her brother, her best friend and her helper all in one. Hermione had been devastated by Harry's loss. She loved Ron, but Harry was her sibling.

Hermione had been struggling to help Harry since the end of the war and at times it seemed like only she knew how to reach him. Unfortunately, it

wasn't enough. Despite having defeated Voldemort, pressure continued to mount on Harry. His fight with Ginny was merely the last straw.

To her credit, once Ginny had realized exactly what she had done, she spent most of the next year working to control her temper. It hadn't been easy for her; she had attended sessions with a Mind Healer at St. Mungo's and had come to realize that she had some very ugly qualities in her character. She eventually learned to overcome those qualities, but she'd always regret what she had lost.

She jerked out of her reverie when the door opened and Harry Potter stepped inside. She noted absently that he looked nearly unchanged. She felt a small shiver course through her body upon seeing him again. This was the only man she had loved enough to want to give all she had to offer, and since he'd left, she had refused all others. And now, it was too late, she was tainted in the eyes of most.

He paused for a moment, then walked over to the empty chair facing hers and sat down.

"My elf tells me you have important news from the Ministry of Magic," he said smoothly. He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands together. "So, tell me, what have those incompetents screwed up this time?"

Ginny frowned for several reasons. His voice was cold, devoid of any emotion except contempt. Nor was there any recognition of what they had once meant to each other. She wasn't expecting much, but even anger would have been a welcome emotion compared to this.

She also found herself upset over his comment about the Ministry. After all, she was a Ministry employee and his attitude reflected on her position. To make matters worse, she couldn't tell if the contempt she heard was for her, personally, or merely reflected his attitude towards the Ministry and its employees.

She flushed and looked down from his intense gaze. "In light of the current crisis..."

"Crisis?"

She looked up and his eyes locked with hers. "You really haven't been paying attention to what's happening to our world, have you?" she asked.

"Your world, not mine," he retorted.

"It's still your world, even if you did run away from it," she countered.

He waved a hand dismissively. "I was never really a welcome member of that world, but this isn't the conversation you came here to have. I'll ask again, what crisis?"

She nodded. At least this part of the conversation would be without any major emotional baggage between them. "Two years ago it became public knowledge that magical births among pureblood couples had dropped to zero in all European countries. World wide birth rates have dropped by as much as sixty percent," she said, then paused while Harry stared at her in surprise.

When he motioned for her to continue, she cleared her throat and continued.

"After some extensive research, it was discovered that Tom had used a rather unique curse during the last battle. It wasn't aimed at you. In fact, according to the pensieve testimonies, it didn't appear to be aimed at anyone. Were it not for a muggle born researcher who had a deaf brother, we might not have discovered the curse at all. Fortunately for us, the researcher, an American, could read lips, a talent he picked up while growing up with his older brother."

She sighed heavily. "It's been determined that Voldemort's curse is responsible for the sterility that is affecting most couples who have pure blood roots."

Harry blinked and stared at her in surprise. He hadn't expected to hear anything like this.

"You're serious?" he asked in a strangled voice.

She nodded grimly. "In Europe, the coverage is total. The effects start to fade the further away you get, but they never fully fade. World wide we estimate the affected to be about sixty percent of the magical population. There are some mitigating factors however. Half bloods and muggle born seem to be unaffected by the curse. As near as we can determine, Tom messed up with a factoring clause in his incantation, and that allowed the people of mixed bloods to escape the curse."

Harry stood and walked over to the fireplace. To her surprise, it flared to life with no gesture from him. "Can't it be dispelled?" he asked tightly.

"We're not even sure of the spell he used. You know that without his equations and the theory behind the spell we can't attempt to reverse it. Besides, only you and Dumbledore have the power necessary and Dumbledore can no longer perform that level of magic. There's even talk of him leaving the Wizengamot."

Harry snorted. There was no love between him and the aging Headmaster who had continued to meddle in his life right up until he moved into his tower.

"Right now, an international team of researchers is attempting to use the pensieve testimonies to reconstruct the spell in the hopes that they can learn enough to create a counter spell for it. No matter how motivated they might be, they acknowledge it could be decades, if ever, before they even understand it."

He turned to face her. "All right, so Voldemort wins in a way. What has this to do with me?"

Ginny's expression darkened. She couldn't believe he was dismissing their plight so easily.

"Every country is dealing with the problem in their own way. Some are resorting to legalizing the abduction of muggle born magical children for adoption into magical families. Others are organizing marriage pools where couples can only wed once they are approved by the government.

"Our Ministry is trying to take a more moderate approach, but what it means is that the Ministry is mandating all persons under the age of fifty who are not already married must do so. Our research has shown that a mixed couple - that is a half blood or muggle born, married to a pure blood - can avoid the curse. It is illegal for a pure blood to marry another pure blood.

"The Ministry doesn't want to appear draconian on this issue, therefore you have two years to select a pure blood to marry and another two years after that to produce a child. Should you fail to marry in the provided time frame, a bride will be chosen for you and you will be compelled to marry her."

As she spoke, Harry's expression darkened and Ginny could feel the hairs on the back of her neck raising. The amount of magical energy she felt bleeding off him was staggering. She held up a hand, offering a rolled up parchment containing a copy of the new regulations and a list of pure blood females compiled by the Ministry for him.

He looked at the parchment. "What's this?" he asked suspiciously. Without even thinking he dispelled all the spells on the parchment she held.

"It's a copy of the new rules, and a list of possible brides to select from," she replied. Her name was not on the list. She had been deemed unsuitable because of her involvement in Harry leaving the wizarding world in the first place and other, more politically motivated reasons.

He took the parchment, unrolled it and glanced through the list. Surprised, he looked at her. "Have you seen this? You're not on the list. Should I congratulate you on your marriage?"

She stood stiffly. "I've not seen the full list, as it wasn't any of my business. I'm here only to deliver it. And though it's none of your business, no, I'm not married. I've been deemed unacceptable to be included on any Ministry created list."

"Unacceptable? Why?" he asked, puzzled and a bit shocked.

She glared at him for a moment. "It's not really important," she replied tensely. "There is contact information on that parchment. Go through the list and make your selection before you lose the chance to pick for yourself. From what I've been told, the Ministry is being far more lenient with you than with anyone else."

She turned and walked to the door, but it refused to open to her hand. "Let me out," she said flatly.

"I want to know why you're unacceptable when this list contains the likes of Narcissa Malfoy and Daphne Greengrass. Neither of them are going to be all that interested in me. I killed their families," he replied softly. "If anyone should be on the list, it should be a Weasley." He shook his head, amused. "Your family takes fertility to an art form."

"Don't do this, Harry," she pleaded. "Just be thankful you're being given a choice. Most people are just told who they have to marry. Hermione would have been told who she had to marry if she wasn't already married to Ron. In fact, she was nearly forced into divorcing Ron. Only her pregnancy prevented that."

"I want to know," he replied stubbornly. He filed the information about Hermione away for later thought. There was too much going on here that he still didn't understand.

She walked back over to the chair and practically threw herself into it. "Fine!" she snapped, then she sighed heavily and stared at her feet. "I'm not acceptable because of my history of mental problems."

"Mental problems?" he gasped.

She wrapped her arms around her. "After you left, Hermione explained to me exactly what I had been doing to you in infinite detail. She pointed out things about myself and I couldn't refute her. After you left, I spent many months working with a mind healer at St. Mungo's, trying to fix things. I needed to grow up. It was too late to save us, but I had to try to save myself.

"I learned things about myself that disgusted me. I threw away the greatest opportunity I would ever have in a fit of immature anger. Healer Thompson helped me come to grips with what I had done and why. I still get angry at times, but I have better control over it now.

"Unfortunately, several years later, one of Dad's rivals, in an effort to discredit him, managed to get his hands on my medical and school records. The five months of therapy I had, coupled with Tom's possession of me in my first year was enough to make many think I wasn't totally stable."

There was a long moment of silence and she glanced up at him.

He rubbed his face tiredly. "Ginny," he said softly. While she had hurt him greatly, she didn't understand all of what had been happening to him and she didn't know about the effects of the ritual. "Our breakup was as much my fault as it was yours. It was a.... bad time... for both of us to be trying to have a relationship."

"There's a difference, Harry," she said firmly.

"Oh?"

"I was so busy trying to be Miss Perfect for Harry the Hero that I couldn't see how badly Harry the person was hurting. And then I let my temper say

things I didn't mean. I couldn't understand why you kept refusing all those invitations. It hurt and I wanted to hurt you because of it, so I did.

"Hermione made me see that, but I needed real help to come to grips with it, and to learn to live with the damage I caused."

He frowned, remembering the pain her words had caused him and the bleak depression that filled his existence for the first six months that he'd lived in the tower. Although he had to admit that she was only a small part of that depression. His rush to kill Voldemort resulted in unforeseen consequences that had nearly driven him insane. Even now he wasn't quite sure how stable he was, mentally.

She looked up at him, then stood, gathering her pride around her. "I'm sure there are a few good names on that list, Pick one soon before the Ministry tries to force your hand."

The door opened and the elf reappeared. "This way, Miss," said the elf.

Ginny stopped and turned at the doorway. "For what it's worth, I'm more sorry than I can say," she said softly, then she turned and followed the elf, not waiting for any reply.

Harry sat staring into the fire, the parchment carelessly discarded on the floor next to his chair. All of the old aches and desires, feelings he had thought he had lost, flared to life. Her leaving reopened an gaping chasm in his heart and he wasn't sure what to do about it.

## **The Burrow...**

She sat up in bed scribbling on a small lap desk. Technically, she wasn't bed ridden, but her back ached a lot these days, and her feet were sore due to swelling. After nearly losing the baby once, she had been ordered to "rest" by her healer.

Her book was nearly complete. If anything, her enforced confinement had one good effect; it had allowed her to work on a book project she had always wanted to do.

"You missed an accent on Ehwaz," said a hauntingly familiar voice. "In fact, without that accent, your equation has an equal chance to either explode or turn the caster into a chocolate cake."

She frowned and stared at her parchment. "No that can't be..." She trailed off and looked up. "Harry?" she whispered.

He gave her one of his patented lopsided grins, then his expression altered. "Geez, Hermione, you've gotten fat!"

She choked back a laugh and, with tears streaming down her cheeks, she gestured wildly for him to come over to the bed.

He walked over and gently hugged her. He then sat down on the side of the bed and waited for her to calm herself.

After a few minutes, she dried her tears. "I've missed you so very much," she said in a whisper.

He sighed and refused to meet her gaze. "I'm sorry, but I needed to get away. I was in a hole I couldn't climb out of and no matter what I did, things only got worse."

"You could have come to me," she protested.

He shook his head and turned to look at her. "No, that was something I couldn't do."

"But..." she trailed off in silence when he held up a hand.

"I couldn't, Hermione. For a big part of my life I relied on you for advice, for help, for everything. I couldn't ask you to help me when you were a part of the problem."

"Me?"

He nodded. "Think about it. After the war ended, Dumbledore continued his string pulling and Ginny, as much as I loved her, pushed me just as hard. Since our first year I've loved you, but I never knew exactly how I loved you and, thanks to Dumbledore, I didn't know if I loved you like a I would a lover, or a sister.

"Ginny didn't help matters. All she did was destroy what feelings I had for her. Between what I felt for her, and you, and what was happening to me, I was a wreck."

"Oh, Harry," she whispered. "I've loved you too, but only like a brother."

He smiled sadly. "I finally came to that same conclusion, as well. You are my sister in every way that's important. And I'm all right with that. I do envy you, though; what you have with Ron is something special." He grinned at her. "But even you'd have to admit it could have happened. It could have been me instead of Ron. Lucky git, but I'll break both his arms if he ever hurts you."

She chuckled and shook her head. This was more like the Harry she used to know and love. "Ginny said she stopped by to see you."

His expression turned serious. "Yes. She came by with that marriage law thing the Ministry came up with."

Hermione's expression echoed his. "What will you do? Have you picked a girl yet?"

He shrugged. "I'm still weighing my options," he said guardedly.

Her eyes narrowed. "Why do I think your options don't include picking a bride from their list?"

He turned and watched her carefully for a moment. "Why are you taking this law so calmly? They're forcing marriages on muggle born and half bloods just to preserve the old families."

"Harry," she said with a sigh, "it's not about preserving the old time families, it's about preserving magical humanity as a species. Even I can see how important that is. I might not approve of their heavy handed approach, but it's better than what some countries are doing in order to preserve the community. Spain, for example, is forcing women into harems. We have an obligation..."

He stood abruptly and walked over to a window. "Don't talk to me about obligations. I've bled for this world. I spent the first ten years of my life living as a slave, thanks to the machinations of a cruel headmaster." He turned and looked at her hard. "Frankly, I'm not sure this society deserves to survive. And then I hear that Ginny is denied a chance to be included on that list..."

Hermione's eyes lit up and she pounced. "Why? Would you want her name on that list? Would you consider her?"

He stopped and closed his mouth, scowling at her.

"Harry," she pressed.

He turned to the window again and ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know," he said quietly. He was silent for awhile, lost to his own thoughts. "I do know she's not mentally unstable. She's being punished because her father rose to a high position in the Ministry after the war and someone wanted him out of the way."

"And they got their wish," she said softly.

His head snapped around and he stared at her. "What?"

"Arthur was pushed out of his position and forced to retire. Politically, he was ruined. They pulled out everything they could get their hands on and showed it in the most unfavorable way. Ginny was just a small part of it. Arthur was vilified for not knowing about Pettigrew," she replied. "He's working for Fred and George at their shop now, but he isn't the same happy go lucky man he once was. Didn't you notice how shabby things looked downstairs when you came in?"

Harry looked at her sheepishly.

She sighed and shook her head. "You apparated directly to my room, didn't you? Right through the wards?"

He nodded.

"Oh, Harry," she said softly with a slight smile. "Some things never change."

He walked over to a chair and sat down heavily. "Talk," he said simply.

"There's not much to say. We've fallen on hard times, but we're getting by. Ron works as a conductor for the Knight Bus. Bill and Charlie still have their jobs, and the twins are doing all right. Ginny works in a minor office of the DMLE as a transcriptionist. Until I was ordered to bed, I worked in a book store on Diagon Alley."

"Ginny mentioned you were nearly forced into divorcing Ron?" he prompted.

She looked down at her hands. "I have a bit of a reputation, thanks to the war and an older gentleman decided he wanted a smart bride. I was inches from running to my parents and fleeing to the States when I became pregnant."

He leaned forward in the chair. "What grounds could they have used to force Ron into divorcing you?"

She looked up at him and he was surprised by the tears sliding down her cheeks. "Don't you understand? They don't need any grounds to force that sort of thing anymore. I'm married to a Weasley, a disgraced family, and I was wanted by a rich pure blood. He probably thought it would be fun to shag a smart girl!"

She gestured to her bulging belly. "This is the only thing that saved me from that fate. As much as I love Ron and I do love him, I hate that I can only be with the man I love as long as I can be a baby maker."

His scowl deepened.

"Don't ask!" she snapped after spotting his expression.

He blinked at her. "What?"

"Don't ask the name of the man who tried to break us up. I won't tell you. I know you Harry and I don't want to have to visit you in Azkaban."

He grinned at her. She knew him too well.

She shook her head and decided to try to change the subject. "So what have you been doing all this time?"

He leaned back in his chair and wandlessly conjured two cups of tea. He passed one to her, then shrugged. "Studying."

She took the cup and sipped from it with a sigh. His wandless magic was not new to her or the Weasleys. In fact, she'd been the one who'd found the ritual that he used to enhance his abilities enough to kill Voldemort. It had been her research and her effort which threw a major monkey wrench into Dumbledore's plans for the war.

"Studying?" she said softly.

He nodded and looked up at the ceiling while he formulated his thoughts. "We didn't realize it at the time, but the ritual did more than just enhance me with the power of Voldemort's victims. It gave me their memories and their talents. They didn't start kicking in until several months after the ritual, and then I fought Voldemort. After the fight, it only got worse as more memories emerged."

He looked down at her, noting her shocked expression. "I left here convinced I was going insane. I had emotions I couldn't explain, flashes of insight that bordered on the sublime. I was losing myself in a sea of personalities. I tried everything, including one half hearted attempt at suicide to make it stop."

Hermione stared at him, her eyes watery and her hand up against her mouth. He gave her a weak smile and conjured a box of tissues for her.

"It took me six months, Hermione. Six months to bring some semblance of order to the chaos. I wept, I screamed and threw things about. Finally one morning I woke up with broken bones in my hand and a hangover like you wouldn't believe. That was when I decided to put a stop to my destructive behavior and start trying to make sense of it."

He leaned back and took a deep breath. "Since then I've been studying anything and everything that caught my interest. My tower is uniquely suited for such endeavors."

"I never knew," she whispered, horrified over what her discover had done to her best friend. "Merlin, I wish I'd never found that ritual now!"

"Don't say that! We didn't know what would happen afterwards, but I needed that power boost. That damn old man refused to train me in any sort of combat magic. I won because my spells were overpowered and I had a fair amount of luck."

She sighed and plucked at her blankets nervously. "I suppose you're right."

Harry frowned. "Hermione, forgive me for asking, but just why are you in bed?"

She looked up at him. "This hasn't been an easy pregnancy. I nearly lost the baby once already."

He stood and walked over to her bedside, his hand glowed briefly and he ran it just above her. When he was done the glow faded and his frown deepened into anger.

"Your baby is distressed and there's a foreign substance causing it," he said tensely.

"Harry?" she said in alarm.

He tapped his temple with a finger. "Hello? Memories of hundreds of people, including a number of healers. Now, where are the potions you're taking?"

She waved a hand towards her night table where several potion bottles lay. He walked over and picked them up one at a time, opening and sniffing at them.

Finally he put them all down except for one. "A calming draught, made with essence of Sawgrass."

Hermione's already pale complexion paled further. The potion was supposed to be modified for a pregnant woman. Normally that meant the Sawgrass was replaced with Sea Kelp. A pregnant woman drinking an unmodified potion would endanger her baby and perhaps miscarry the pregnancy.

"I wonder if this was an honest mistake or something more sinister?" Harry murmured, mostly to himself.

"You don't think..."

"I don't know what to think right now," he replied uneasily. "More politics? Perhaps it's your pure blood wannabe husband trying to sabotage your pregnancy? Who knows. From the sound of it, there are plenty of possibilities. One thing is certain, you're no longer taking potions that haven't been checked."

He paced the room for a moment, then he snapped his fingers. "Frick!" he said in a loud voice.

A moment later an elf dressed in an elegant butlers uniform appeared. "Master Potter called?" he said calmly.

"Mrs. Weasley has been given an incorrect potion. Would you please get a pregnancy safe calming draught and then double check all of her other potions to insure they are what they appear to be?"

Frick nodded and vanished with a small pop.

"Harry, I don't think we can afford..."

He walked over to the bed and sat on the edge. "My sister is going to have her baby and I intend to make sure both of them are healthy! I owe it to



you and Ron.”

She burst into tears and pulled him into a tight hug. He held her, letting her cry it out. He couldn't help but feel a little jealous of Ron and Hermione. They had something he wanted for himself. The problem was the one person he wanted that from had hurt him terribly. He wasn't sure he could trust her with his heart again.

When she was finally calm she sat back, resting against her pillows. “Will you meet with the rest of the family?” she asked softly.

“I suppose I should,” he admitted. She could hear the reluctance in his voice.

She nodded, understanding how difficult that meeting would be. Not a single Weasley blamed him for leaving or for what happened to them after he left. But she knew he would blame himself for their misfortune.

He stood up. “Tell Molly that I'll come to Sunday's dinner, but please don't let her go overboard about it.”

She nodded and smiled at him. Molly would be ecstatic to have him over, even if it were just for dinner.

He untied a small pouch at his belt and dropped it on her night table.

“Harry, you don't have to do that,” she admonished. She didn't want his money.

He grinned at her. “It's too late, I've already done it. And I'll remind you, Mrs. Weasley, that you are a Weasley by marriage, not by birth, so I won't accept their stubborn pride from you. Frick will be by with your potions and I'll have him check with you at least once a day.

“If anything goes wrong, anything, call for him and he'll get me. I'm serious about this, Hermione. Don't let Ron or the Weasley's pride endanger your health or your baby's health over a few measly galleons.”

She blushed and nodded.

“Harry?” she said, stopping him just as he prepared to apparate away.

“Yes?”

“What will you do about the marriage law?”

He looked down for a few moments, silent and thoughtful. “I honestly don't know. If it weren't for the troubles you guys were going through, I'd probably ignore it entirely or leave the wizarding world.”

“And Ginny?” she asked quietly.

He looked at her and his eyes reflected the pain her question caused him. “You know what she did to me, what she accused me of. How do I get past that?”

Hermione sighed. “I guess you're right. Besides, the Ministry would never allow...”

“The Ministry has no say in the matter and the day they think they can enforce their will on me is the day they discover that Voldemort is nothing compared to me,” he told her quietly. “The list they presented to me was a joke. Half of the women on that list had Death Eater fathers or husbands. A third are old enough to be my mother. And then I discover that they consider Ginny unstable and unsuitable?”

He stood there breathing heavily, clearly angry.

*So he does still care for her, she thought to herself. He's right, though. The Ministry is clearly trying to do something with the list of women he was offered. It would be so much simpler if Ginny wasn't considered unsuitable.*

“So, you'll eventually pick someone from the list?” she asked. She was pretty certain he wouldn't, but she was curious about what he'd do.

“Maybe I won't have to,” he replied evasively.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked suspiciously.

He shrugged. “Stranger things have happened,” he replied, then glanced at his watch. “Look at the time! I better go!”

He sketched her a simple salute and vanished from sight. She scowled and huffed a few times. He knew more than what he was telling her and his leaving was just his way of avoiding the topic.

## **Malfoy Manor...**

Narcissa awoke to a strange sensation. She was firmly held in place in her bed and she couldn't move anything except her head. She looked about wildly.

“Just so you know, as we speak, your darling son is struggling to breathe. He's just getting enough air to keep him alive, but that could change at a moments notice. I would suggest that you listen to your instructions and follow them carefully,” said a voice.

She snapped her head around to look at the intruder. “How dare you...ahhhhh!”

She screamed as one of the bones in her left foot snapped.

“Tsk, tsk, Narcissa. Not only are you endangering the life of your son, you're causing yourself pain for no reason.”

She shook her head and for the first time since the war, she knew fear. Potter stood at the side of her bed, softly glowing in the darkness. What really frightened her wasn't the pain or the threats, it was the killing curse color of his eyes as they looked down at her. His eyes held no pity or remorse. They were, in fact, empty of any emotion. Even Voldemort didn't have that cold a gaze.

“What do you want, Potter?” she gasped in pain.

“You will go to the Ministry tomorrow morning when it opens and you will demand to be removed from the list of possible brides they offered me. Then you will suggest to any woman you know on that list that they remove themselves, as well. Tell them that it's in their best interests to do so, but do not explain about this visit or what happened here.”

“And if I don't?”

He looked at her for a moment. “Then come this Saturday you will have a new husband, and once the four hour waiting period is over, as required by Gringotts, I shall become a widower and controller of the Malfoy fortune. Your precious Draco will not survive his grief over your passing. I'm afraid he'll be so heartsick over your loss, he'll do something rash and... permanent.”

She gritted her teeth. “You can't... aieeeee!”

He smiled coldly down at her. “That one cost you another bone and even now Draco is slowly smothering to death. I bet he's as blue as a berry.”

She looked at him, pleadingly.

“Do not look for mercy from me, woman. You bribed your way out of jail and bought your son's freedom when he should have been executed. Thankfully, I stamped your husbands exit visa from this life. Killing you two would be doing the world a service. Now, are you going to cooperate or will the Malfoy line end forever?”

“I'll do it, I'll do it!” she chanted. She had soiled herself in her fear. Potter had scared her even more than Voldemort had at his height. She had never felt the brunt of the Dark Lord's displeasure and couldn't know that Harry was merely following his example.

He cast a numbing charm on her foot, then floated her wand over to her and released her binding. “I'll take an unbreakable vow from you that you'll do what you said, and that you'll tell no one of what happened here tonight.”

After she had delivered her oath, he nodded. “I was never here,” he said, then vanished, apparating right through the very best wards money could buy.

She shivered as if she felt a cold wind. She knew exactly how close she had come to death tonight. *One thing is certain*, she thought as she sat up and reached for a decanter of brandy she kept by her bedside. *Gryffindor's golden child is no longer so golden. He's grown up and into his powers and he's not afraid of using them.*

“Mother? Are you all right?” said a voice at the door.

“Come in, Draco,” she said tensely, then she waved her wand, healing the bones in her foot as best she could. She looked up to see Draco staring at her intently. He was pale and looked like he had been sweating profusely.

“Somethings happened. I was reading and suddenly I had a terrible time trying to breathe,” he said.

She waved that off. “Instruct the elves to begin to prepare the manor for a long absence. I have to go to the Ministry tomorrow morning. When I return, we will be leaving to stay with cousin Mallory in Monaco.”

He gaped at her. “How long will we be gone?”

“A century might be long enough,” she muttered, her thoughts flitting wildly about. Voldemort was something the Malfoy's could have survived. But she was certain she had only seen a brief glimpse of Potter's abilities. He was ruthless like Voldemort and diametrically opposed to everything the Malfoy family stood for. She didn't want to be in Britain when he finally came to power.

## **The Burrow...**

Hermione sat at the table, peeling potatoes and watching Molly bustle about. Molly kept a close eye on her daughter-in-law. The revelation that one of potions had been wrong had shaken the older woman. She still wasn't sure what to make of it. And the news that it was Harry who had discovered the problem shook her even more. She had been convinced that she had lost him forever.

Molly checked on the large roast in the oven and moved to the table to help Hermione. Hermione had purchased the groceries with money she said came from the Book store, but Molly knew better. She wasn't going to call Hermione on it, but she strongly suspected that the money had come from Harry.

The door opened and Ginny walked in. She greeted her mother and sister-in-law, then sat down next to Hermione and picked up a knife and a potato.

Did everything go alright at the Ministry, dear? It must have been a real emergency for them to call you in on a Sunday," Molly said.

"No, not really an emergency. But they wanted me to deliver another message to Harry. They wanted to prepare me, but they didn't have it ready."

"Probably more of that marriage law business," Hermione said softly.

Ginny nodded. "Could be. There are rumors floating around the Ministry that a number of the potential brides he was offered have backed out, asking that they be removed from consideration. I don't know if that's true or not, but I do know the Malfoys have left the country quite unexpectedly."

Molly sniffed loudly and shook her head. "Well, good riddance to bad rubbish, I say. I don't know what she was thinking by having her name placed on that list. She's old enough to be his mother."

Ginny expertly peeled the potato then reached for another. "Have you discovered any more about that potion problem, Hermione?" she asked. She wanted to get off the topic of that blasted law. It hurt her deeply to know that she could have been married to Harry by now, if only she had learned to control her temper before the end of the war.

"Melli says she told the apothecary to give me the pregnancy safe version of the draught and they claim they did. She apologized profusely over it, calling it a terrible error," Hermione replied with a shrug. "We may never know for certain, but Harry's elf says he could detect the residue of a switching spell on that bottle. Frick stops by at least once a day and he was there when Healer Melli checked on me yesterday. He said Harry asked him to keep a watchful eye on me."

Ginny looked down at her potato and Molly shook her head in amazement. "That man has enough problems without having to adopt ours as well. Bless him. Considering all he's been through, he's still a good boy."

"So, what did Melli tell you about the baby?" Ginny asked.

Hermione grinned. "She said that right now everything is fine." Her smile slipped a little. "She can't be certain that the potion didn't have an undue effect on the baby, but she doesn't think that's the case. Right now, everything appears normal."

Molly smiled and patted Hermione's hand. "I know Ron was relieved to hear that."

Hermione nodded. "He's usually so strong, but when I told him what Melli said, he grabbed me and cried a little."

Ginny hid a wince. This topic was nearly as bad as the first! It seems everywhere she turned today she was being reminded of what had been denied her.

"Hullo Weasleys!" Arthur said from the doorway. "Look who Ron and I found pacing outside our front door!"

Arthur turned and waved. Harry hesitantly entered the room.

"Harry!" exclaimed Molly, then she dropped her knife and potato and sprang to her feet. In an instant Harry was engulfed in one of her hugs.

Ron grinned and moved around the pair to stand behind Hermione. She leaned back on her chair and he placed a hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently. With his free hand he dug into one pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, which he passed to his sniffing wife. Her pregnancy had resulted in her being very emotional at times, so he was always prepared.

He smiled at his friend and his mum, who was barely controlling her own emotions. Proudful he might be, but he was extremely thankful for Harry's help with Hermione's pregnancy. He swore he'd pay his friend back someday, but right now he'd swallow his pride if it meant Hermione and the baby would be safe.

"Caught him pacing back and forth in front of the door and muttering to himself. I'm not sure if he was working up the nerve to come in, or to run. Merlin knows I've wanted to run a few times myself," Arthur exclaimed. "Something smells heavenly!"

"Oh, the roast!" Molly said, releasing Harry and rushing to the stove.

Ginny grinned slightly at his flustered look, then she gathered up the potatoes they had been peeling and put them in a large pot.

"We still have time." Molly announced.

"I'll start setting the table," Hermione announced.

"No, you won't," replied Ron. "You'll sit. You may be feeling better, but you're still supposed to rest. I'll set the table."

Harry arched an eyebrow and turned to look at Hermione, who blushed. There were some things about Ron that never changed, but her decision to go slow on their marriage had forced him to grow up in many ways. He had turned into a thoughtful, loving man and he was just assertive enough to keep her from overdoing things.

"Sit, Harry, sit!" Arthur said, waving him over to a chair while Molly, Ginny and Ron bustled around.

"Maybe I can help?" offered Harry uncertainly.

"Not this time," Molly said from behind him. She set a stack of dishes on the table and gave him a quick hug again. "You've done plenty just by discovering what was wrong with Hermione's pregnancy."

Over the next two hours, while dinner was served and eaten, he slowly fell back into the old patterns as part of the family.

Finally dinner was over and everyone was sitting around the table, enjoying a cup of tea. Harry looked around at the people he still considered his family. Hermione sat close to Ron and was leaning against him. He had an arm thrown casually around her shoulders and his hand played softly in her hair. Molly sat next to Arthur, holding his hand and listening as he spoke to their daughter. Ginny was smiling and shaking her head at her father as he explained yet another prank the twins had pulled at the shop.

Molly, too, looked around the table and couldn't help but smile at what she saw. It was perfect, as far as she was concerned. Her family was together again. Sure times were still tough, but maybe this was a sign of better things to come.

The only fly in the ointment, for Harry at least, came from Ginny. Neither had spoken much to the other during the course of the dinner. He avoided looking at her because it caused his heart to ache every time he did. She was so close, but emotionally they were light years apart.

"I wanted to say I'm sorry," Harry said softly when there came a rare moment of silence.

"Oh, Harry, no. You have nothing to apologize for," Molly said fervently.

He shook his head in denial. "No, I think I do. I can't help feeling that my leaving contributed to all the problems this family has experienced in the past few years."

Molly moved to protest, but Arthur stilled her with a hand on hers. "I can see where you might think that Harry, but unless you were able to get involved in politics, little would have prevented my being forced from the Ministry."

"Still, I've always considered you family," he replied. "If nothing else, I owe you an explanation for my actions."

"I don't agree with you, but if you think it will help, then go ahead," Ron murmured. "I think all of us would like to understand better what happened. Hermione has only given us the barest outline."

"It wasn't my tale to tell," Hermione added. Ron grinned and kissed the top of her head.

Harry nodded and his expression turned somber.

"After Voldemort, we all came back here and for several months did little except try to heal. You all know about the ritual Hermione found and I performed. What neither of us suspected was that it would have unforeseen effects."

Arthur frowned. "I know it was supposed to give you the power of the victims of your enemy, or at least that's what I recall of Hermione's explanation."

Hermione nodded shakily at her father-in-law.

"After I performed the ritual, I increased the tempo of my training until that was all I was doing. You all remember how angry Dumbledore was when I refused to attend classes, but he wouldn't expel me," Harry said softly.

Molly scowled. Like most of the Weasleys, they had little respect for the elder wizard these days. Too much had come to light about his actions that he could only justify with nebulous excuses about it being for the best.

"After I killed Voldemort, I stopped training. That was when the problems started to happen."

"Of course," Hermione muttered. "You were exhausted from your daily training and magically depleted. But once the fight was over you didn't need to expend so much magic every day, or work until you dropped."

Harry grinned weakly at her. "Ten points to Gryffindor, Mrs. Weasley."

"What sort of effects did you experience?" asked Ron. Hermione hadn't explained this to him and he was willing to respect the fact that it was Harry's story to tell.

"I discovered that I got the power of Voldemort's victims, as well as their memories," he said bleakly.

Molly gasped and Ginny turned to stare at him in horror.

"All of them?" asked Arthur.

"Even my parents," Harry whispered in reply. "All their memories, right up to the moment of their deaths, and I experienced their emotions, especially their rage and fear over being killed. I thought I was going insane. Once I realized what was happening, I commissioned a Swiss Gnome company to build my tower. I thought if I had a place I could retreat to, if I became dangerous to others..."

He paused and took a very deep breath. His gaze shifted to each person at the table before stopping at Ginny.

Hermione hitched in a breath and turned her face into Ron's shoulder. She knew the basics of what Harry was explaining, but she hadn't made the connection between the memories and whose memories he might have gotten.

Harry took another breath and his eyes were suspiciously bright. "All I wanted to be after the war was just plain old Harry. Not Harry Potter the Man-Who-Won, not Harry with more power than any man should have. I didn't want to go to parties or balls, I didn't want the awards and the articles

written about me. I wanted to be able to walk down the street, holding the hand of my girlfriend and not be bothered by reporters wanting interviews or people wanting pictures and autographs.”

He trailed off into silence and his hands played nervously with his tea cup.

“I think that under the circumstances, I would have left also,” Arthur said quietly to everyone's surprise.

Molly reached over and patted Harry's hand. “Well, you're back now, aren't you?” she asked a bit tearfully.

“Sort of,” he replied somewhat evasively. “Let's just say that I will be living in my tower, but you'll see me around more often than I have been these past few years. I have a number of projects going on that need my attention.”

“Ginny mentioned that there seemed to be an awful lot of magic in that place of yours,” Hermione said.

He shot Ginny a brief glance. Since his revelation about the ritual, she had been staring at the table top. He turned back to Hermione. “Parts of the tower are heavily enchanted. That's one of the advantages of having all of those memories. There are features about the tower that are unique in the wizarding world,” he replied softly. “It's my home and my place of work.”

“Work?” asked Ron.

Harry shrugged. “Honestly, Ron, if I told you I spent a good deal of my day studying, you'd run away screaming that Hermione had some how infected me with her particular brand of insanity. But think about it. I have the memories of several hundred people, and their knowledge. Potion masters, healers, Charms and Defense masters, muggle doctors, engineers, teachers. I've probably got the memories of people of any profession you can name.

He tapped this temple with a finger.

“It's all here and I might as well put it to use. Besides, between the Potter and Black inheritances, I don't really need to work, do I? I can't really see myself working for the Ministry. It's as corrupt today as it was before Voldemort.”

“But what do you study?” Ron asked, pressing the issue.

“I've been studying several things, including Atlantean Runes, and the nature of infinity,” Harry said softly.

Hermione's eyes lit up and she sucked in a breath. Harry shot her a grin. “I don't suppose you'd mind a little part time work after the baby is born?” he asked teasingly. While he didn't really need her work, in his mind, she was far too smart to be wasting her talents in a book store. She would be perfect to take his work and extend it out for others to use.

Ron placed a hand on her arm and she looked at him curiously. Ron ignored her. “What would you have her doing?”

“Some of what I've learned can be used by others, Ron, but I don't have the time needed to take it to the final step. I've created a number of spells and enchantments that only I can do because I don't need a wand. Hermione knows the process of composing wand movements and incantations from the equations. Frick could bring over my notes every day and she could spend her time doing that and taking care of the baby.

“If any of the spells turn out to be marketable, I'd cut her in on the profits,” Harry offered.

“A most generous offer,” Arthur commented.

Ron searched Hermione's face carefully. He knew she wasn't happy working at the bookstore. She wanted to do something more important than stacking shelves and making recommendations. Slowly he grinned at her. “It's your decision sweetheart,” he said softly. He knew that she wanted this, and it would be an opportunity for her to finally show the world what Hermione Weasley could do.

She smiled softly at her husband and gently ran a hand over his cheek. Turning back to Harry, she smiled. “I'll do it.”

Harry nodded and told her he'd send some samples of his work over for her to read. She'd be able to use that as an idea of what other materials she might need.

Abruptly, Ginny stood. “Excuse me, I think I'll go up to my room,” she said softly.

Everyone looked at her in surprise. She had said little all evening and this came as a bit of a shock to everyone. “All right, dear,” Molly replied.

Ginny turned and left the room. Harry's eyes followed her every step. Molly took in his gaze and the stiff back of her retreating daughter, then sighed heavily. *There is so much hurt between them*, she thought sadly.

“Harry, lad,” Arthur said softly, startling him. “I wanted to talk to you...”

“Arthur, if this is about Ginny...” he trailed off when the older man shook his head.

“No. As much as we love you both, what happens between you is your business. You're both adults now. Instead, I wanted to warn you. I'm not without some friends still in the Ministry and it's a much changed place these days. The curse has shaken the world and some fairly extreme individuals have risen to power due to it. As harsh as the British Marriage law is, it only narrowly defeated a much harsher bill. I'd hate to see you run afoul of the current powers that be. Things could get very ugly for you.”

Harry frowned and leaned back in his seat. "I agree things could get ugly. In fact, I'm certain they will. I've bled too much for this society to allow it to dictate who I will marry and have children with. We all know that what they are doing to you and your family is politically motivated. And what they did to Ginny..."

"Ginny?" Molly asked, interrupting him. She leaned forward and watched him intently.

Harry sighed and removed his glasses. "You know she's no more unstable than any of you. Bloody hell, I'm more unstable than she is. She deserves a chance for a decent life, not some bloody Ministry branding her unsuitable."

He stood abruptly. "I should go. There's an experiment I need to check on," he muttered. "Thank you for the dinner. I've keyed my wards to allow you to send owls to me, and I've instructed Frick to answer your call should anything important happen."

He then vanished without a sound.

Arthur let out an explosive breath and took a large gulp from his tea. "Well, that was unexpected."

"He still loves her," Hermione said softly.

"And she him," Molly replied. "But there is so much pain between them and now this law keeps them apart."

"Bloody stupid stubborn people," Ron muttered. "If it weren't for that stupid fight, they'd be together and free from the law."

"You don't know that Ron," Hermione chided. "You heard Harry when he told us what he went through. Could anyone of us have helped him through that?"

"No, not then. None of us could have helped him," Molly said softly. "But Ginny could now."

"Molly," Arthur said in a warning tone. "Don't encourage her. The Ministry would put her in Azkaban if she interfered with their law."

On the other side of the door, Ginny lifted her head and wiped away her tears. Her feelings for Harry hadn't changed in the past five years. But she had lost her chance and now they'd never be together. She silently moved away from the door and headed up to her bedroom.

### **The Greengrass Estate...**

Daphne stepped out of her bathroom, a towel wrapped around her body and walked towards her dresser.

"You should have listened to Narcissa, Miss Greengrass."

She whirled and summoned her wand to her hand with a silent summoning charm.

"Wandless magic. I'm impressed. Can you do more than a simple summoning, Daphne?" Harry asked. He leaned against the back of her door, his arms crossed.

"Well, Potter, have you decided I'm the one you want?" she asked, then unwrapped the towel from around her body and dropped it to the floor. "Here to sample the goods, perhaps?"

Harry eyed her appreciatively for a moment, then his expression turned mocking. "Sorry, Daphne, the packaging is pleasant to look at, but you're poison in an attractive wrapper." He waved a hand, taking in his surroundings. "You have everything you could possibly want. You're Lady Greengrass, thanks to your parents foolishly putting off your getting marked. That was the only reason why you lived through that day. Now, why would you be interested in the man that killed your parents and your older brother?"

She smirked at him and moved one leg forward, turning slightly, then placed one hand on her hip, as if daring him to look at her. "You're a powerful wizard and wealthy. I deserve to be married to only the best. Think of the children we'd have! They'd be magically and politically powerful. Together we could be the most powerful couple in Europe, maybe even the world."

"Now, now, Daphne. You're not telling me the truth. That kind of behavior could get you in trouble," he replied, wagging a finger at her.

Her wand suddenly snapped up. "*Imperio*!" she cried.

He stood still, letting his expression relax.

"I don't have to tell you anything, Harry," she said softly. "You will be my husband for as long as I want. As long as you do as I say, we'll rule the wizarding world. With your help, we'll teach those Ministry hacks a thing or two about plotting."

She turned to her dresser, intent on pulling out some clothing, when he spoke.

"I don't suppose you remember that I threw off the Imperius in our fourth year? Hell, your half blood lord couldn't keep me under, so it should come as no shock to you that you can't either. Now, why don't we talk about those Ministry hacks and their plans?"

She reached for her wand and it crumbled to dust in her hand. Her blood seemed to freeze in her veins when he spoke again.

"I'm more proficient in wandless magic than you are, Daphne. A simple aging charm reduced your wand to dust in seconds."

She stiffened in shock and found herself being lifted up and turned around. He stood as calmly as before, but she was floating in the air, moving

toward a nearby chair and he wasn't making a single gesture! His abilities under stress unnerved her. She had plans that would have hopefully resulted in a cooperative union between them and those plans were going up in flames.

He moved her over to a chair and planted her firmly on it. "Now, then, why don't you tell me exactly what the Ministry is planning?" he asked.

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

He smiled and leaned a little closer. "You're naked as the day you were born, bound to a chair and your wand is destroyed, all of which happened without me uttering a single word. Do not think you can bargain with me. Tell me what I want to know and I'll let you live. Don't, and you'll discover why so many supporters of the former Dark Lord are still running from me."

She tried staring up at him for a minute longer, then her shoulders slumped in defeat. She couldn't intimidate him like she did so many other men.

"There are elements within the Ministry that want you out of the way. Whomever you pick from the list would be given access to certain banned potions for the purpose of controlling you and your actions," she mumbled, refusing to meet his eye.

"And your plans?"

She looked up at him. "I thought I could use sex to bring you over to my side. I know I'm not unattractive. I thought if I could control you long enough to 'sample the goods', you'd want to stay willingly. Together we'd take over the Wizengamot and move against those in the Ministry."

She looked at him haughtily. "I don't need potions to entice a man and frankly any man who comes to my bed, comes back willingly. I could show you delights that would amaze you and I'd treat you better than you could possibly imagine."

He sat down in a chair across from her and eyed her carefully. For the first time in this encounter she suddenly felt ashamed of her nudity.

"I see," he said softly. He sat thinking about what she had revealed. Her intentions were only marginally better than the Ministry. The only difference is she felt she'd be able to convince him to join with her willingly, once he had enjoyed her body.

"Why do they feel I'm a threat to them?" he asked suddenly. "I've been away from the wizarding world for the past five years."

She shrugged. "I can only tell you what I think. No one told me their motivations."

"Well, what do your finely honed Slytherin instincts tell you?"

She winced and swallowed nervously. "I think they're afraid you'll come back and disrupt whatever they have planned. With Dumbledore being so old, nearly everyone agrees that you're the most powerful wizard in the country."

He shook his head ruefully. *Power. It always boils down to power,* he thought. *Someone wants it and is afraid I'll prevent them from taking it.*

Daphne was a different issue. The concept that someone would marry another person for any reason other than love still amazed him. In the end, it was still the same story. She thought her path to power would be through him.

Turning his attention back to her, he asked, "Are you going to cooperate or are things going to get unpleasant?"

"I think you're making a mistake, Potter, but I know when I've lost," she replied. "None of the other women on the list are good enough..." She paused and cocked her head, looking at him for a moment. Then she smirked. "You have no intentions of marrying anyone on that list, do you?"

When he shook his head, she shrugged. "I'll owl the Ministry today and ask to be removed from the list. I'll cite a family emergency as my reason. I can be in Cape Town by noon today and out of their reach."

He glanced at his watch and nodded. "In the meantime, why don't you tell me everything you know about what's happening at the Ministry?"

She glanced down at her naked form and then looked at him again with a slight smile. "Like this?"

He grinned. "I said I wouldn't touch you. I never said I wouldn't look. Despite some press articles to the contrary, I am only human and mostly definitely not gay."

She shook her head. "What a pair we would have made," she murmured. "Very well then, my first inkling of what was happening came several years ago with I received a notice..."

### **The Black Tower...**

Once again, Frick led Ginny into the visitor's room, only this time the room had been altered. Instead of the cold, impersonal room it once had been, it had been transformed into a comfortable sitting room. A large magical window let in bright light from a mountain meadow scene. The mantle contained a number of photos, mostly of Ron and Hermione or people from Hogwarts. She was pleased to note there were several of her.

The fire burned merrily in the fireplace and Frick magically stoked it before leaving the room. She even found the furniture to be more comfortable than last time.

The door opened and Harry entered. He wore his customary black slacks and shirt with a loose over-robe similar to the Hogwarts style. Not having been raised in the Wizarding world, he never fully adopted the robe as a standard form of dress, preferring slacks and a shirt. Ginny admitted to herself that he looked better that way, rather than in a big bulky robe.

He sat in the chair opposite her and watched her for a moment before speaking. "Something tells me this isn't a social visit."

She blushed and looked down before reaching into a pocket and pulling out a sealed parchment. "You know, they wouldn't force me to deliver this if you'd just allow their owls to find you."

He grinned. "Perhaps that's the reason why I don't let their owls find me," he replied, then he leaned forward and took the offered document.

Her blush deepened. She hadn't expected him to make a flirtatious comment like that.

He unrolled the parchment and examined it briefly, then he laid it on the table next to his chair. "It seems that the list is getting smaller and the Ministry is starting to make threats," he said with a slight smirk. "Someone's getting nervous."

"Rumor has it that you're the reason why women keep asking to be removed from the list," Ginny replied. "Just what have you been up to?"

He looked back at her innocently. "Me? I've barely stepped foot outside of my tower."

"Harry," she admonished.

He shrugged. "I've just decided to tell some of those women exactly what I thought of them and their offer," he admitted.

She leaned back and grinned. "So you've been resorting to intimidation and blackmail?"

"I prefer to think I had an mature, adult conversation with them," he replied.

She nodded but she couldn't help grinning at him. "Yeah, meaning they cowered while you did that eye flashy thing of yours and your fingers sparked with magic. Even mum gets worried when you pull that

routine."

He looked at her in shock. His eye flashy thing was something he rigorously suppressed most of the time. It reminded him too much of Dumbledore's twinkle. Occasionally, like now when he was surprised, his control slipped and his eyes glowed with an inner light. The very thought that he could intimidate Molly Weasley astounded him.

She shivered in her chair when he looked at her. She could see the flicker that back lit his eyes and it didn't intimidate her. The effect on her was completely opposite. She could lose herself in his gaze. With a slight shake of her head, she refocused on her task. "So, what will you do with this new list?"

He shrugged. "I don't know yet. I've learned some information about what's going on that I'm still digesting."

His expression turned serious and the flirtatious mood vanished instantly. "I've discovered who provided all the needed detail to your father's political enemies and I'm unsure what to do about it."

"What do you mean?"

"When I found out my first inclination was to personally kill the individual, but... well, that would cause complications that I don't want to think about."

She leaned forward on her chair. "No, we don't want to have to visit you in Azkaban, Harry. As much as I love Dad, it was just a job. Even he wouldn't want you to go to prison over it."

"No! It was more than that. It ruined your life! Don't you see? It wasn't just the information on Pettigrew, it was also the information on you as well!"

"Why is what happened to me so important to you?" she asked softly.

He looked away, refusing to meet her gaze, but he could feel it on him.

"Harry?"

He stood abruptly and looked at her. "I think we should have this discussion with your parents present."

She frowned. "We're both adults, Harry. I don't need my parents permission for anything anymore."

"Ginny, this isn't just about us, it concerns your entire family," he said softly.

*US? she thought. We're an us? Since when?*

She crossed her arms and sighed heavily. "Fine, but I want some answers later."

He nodded and she suddenly experienced an intense vertigo and then someone screamed. She felt a pair of arms lift her effortlessly up and place her in a chair. Without even seeing him, she knew it was Harry.

"Sorry," he whispered against her ear and she shivered.

Molly was waving her wand over a puddle of spilled tea and glaring at both her and Harry. Hermione sat in another chair, gaping at the pair.



I'm sorry. I should have brought us to the front door, but... well, I guess I wasn't thinking," he mumbled, blushing furiously.

"Goodness, you nearly scared the life out of me," exclaimed Molly, "and poor Hermione. Harry, you of all people should know it's not good to shock a pregnant woman!"

Molly's shock and surprise trailed off when she noticed how closely Harry was standing to Ginny. Something was different, and the confused look on Ginny's face told her that even she wasn't sure about what was happening.

Smoothing some imaginary wrinkles in her dress she took a deep breath, then looked at Harry. "I take it you had a reason for appearing in my kitchen?"

Harry nodded, his cheeks still flaming. "Can you call Arthur and ask him to come home? I need to speak with you all."

"Ron, too?" asked Hermione.

Harry smiled at her. "I think he can skip it. You'll tell him all about it later, and give him the help he'll need getting over it."

Hermione's eyes widened. She knew Harry well enough to know he wasn't bringing happy news today. The others might not be able to read him as well as she, but she knew it.

"I'll go floo, Arthur," Molly said, leaving the room.

The three sat in silence for several minutes until Arthur and Molly entered the room, both of them looking concerned.

"Harry? What's this about?" asked Arthur.

Harry sat down next to Ginny, looking around slowly. "I have to admit that I've been... um..talking to some of the women on the list provided by the Ministry. And while most of the conversations were pretty much uninformative, one yielded a rather interesting nugget of information."

"Meaning he threatened the women into asking to be dropped from his list," muttered Ginny.

Harry shot her a dark look and Arthur glared at her. "Ginny, not now," he commanded. She dropped her eyes at her father's verbal rebuke.

"What did you discover?" Arthur pressed. "It had to concern us, considering you asked to speak to us."

"It turns out that the person who gave your political enemies the information they used to ruin your career, and Ginny's life, was none other than Percy Weasley," Harry said softly.

"No!" exclaimed Molly.

Arthur's face darkened to a deep red. It matched Ginny's perfectly.

"My first thought was to kill him," Harry continued, then he looked up at Molly with a stricken expression. "But as much as I wanted to hurt him for hurting you, I knew that would only cause other difficulties."

"No, Harry, you can't," Molly said, her eyes tearing up. "Tell him, Arthur."

Arthur took a deep breath and he placed one hand on Ginny's shoulder, signaling to her to bring her own temper under control. "How sure are you of this information?"

"My informant told me that Wainwright boasted to her about the source," Harry replied.

Arthur frowned. Alexander Wainwright had been one of the key people behind the movement to get him removed. The man now held Arthur's old job. He turned to Molly, who sat in shock, her tear streaked face turned to him, her pained expression burned his heart.

Harry looked between the two and felt like he had visited more pain on this family that had been so good to him. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "Perhaps I should just go."

Hermione reached out and grabbed his wrist. "No you don't, Harry. You're not taking blame for this on yourself. No one is to blame but Percy."

Molly nodded fervently and reached out to take his other hand. "This isn't your fault, Harry. I don't know where we went wrong with Percy..."

"I don't know, either, but I know what to do about it. Molly, would you bring me the family book please?" Arthur said heavily.

Molly and Ginny gasped at him. Molly stood unsteadily and walked out of the room.

"Dad?" whispered Ginny.

"Not now, Ginevra," he replied. It was a tone unlike Harry had ever heard from the man before. Hermione and Harry shared a confused look before turning back to Arthur.

Molly walked back into the room. Against her chest she cradled an ancient looking volume. "Are you sure, Arthur? Hermione and Harry..."

He held up a hand and she watched him warily. "A tradition that is best left in the past, Molly," he replied. "Hermione is a Weasley and has every

right to know about the book. As for Harry, he's been ours ever since Fred and George rescued him from those awful people. I still curse Dumbledore for convincing us to let him go back there year after year."

Arthur turned to look at Harry and Hermione.

"This book is a Weasley family secret. Hermione would have been told about the book in due time, but Harry, you're as much family as any of our blood. You both need to know about it, and what it represents.

"For generations, the Weasleys have consulted their book and used it to record the births and deaths in the family. Legend has it that the book is a source of a wondrous curse, and perhaps there is some truth to the legend. We Weasleys have always been blessed with an abundance of love in our families, and an abundance of family. It is also said that the book represents a source of power for the Weasley family.

"One thing is known; being a Weasley is more than just being a name in a family. Being a Weasley means being able to tap into a larger pool of magic."

Arthur smiled at Hermione. "When Ron and you married, Molly and I entered your name into the book. We were so happy and proud to bring such a lovely witch our clan. It was obvious that you loved our Ron deeply and we knew that wasn't an easy thing to do. He's a stubborn Weasley, as stubborn as they come. And now you're helping bring about the next generation of Weasleys. While you probably didn't notice any difference, as time goes on, your magic will gradually increase, because you are one of us now."

Molly nodded and smiled at her daughter-in-law. "It's true, and believe me, you'll need it to ride herd over a bunch of Weasley babies."

Hermione blushed and looked down, but she couldn't hide the sheepish smile that flitted across her expression. It touched her deeply to know that her in-laws approved of her so much.

Arthur took the book from Molly and laid it on the table, then he ran his hand reverently over it. "There are nearly 1200 years of Weasleys listed here. This book, along with the family grimoire, are our most prized possessions."

Harry nodded to himself. He had long since discovered his family grimoire. It was a treasure beyond measure because it connected him with the Potter family in ways he couldn't describe.

Arthur's expression darkened. "Three times in the past, just three times in the past 1200 years, has a Weasley been stricken from the book, cast out of the clan. When that happens, their magic is lessened by what ever amount they received from the clan pool. The descriptions say the process is rather unpleasant for the one being cast out."

Ginny looked down at the table. She knew where her father was heading and tears silently started to fall. She wasn't sure if she was crying for Percy, or for what he had done to her. A hand reached out and touched hers, comforting her. She looked up, startled by the gesture from Harry and her gaze locked with his. Right then and there she promised herself she'd get answers from him today, no matter what else happened.

"Of the three who have been cast out, two were for betrayals and one committed a crime that brought unspeakable shame to the family," Arthur murmured. He opened the book and Molly moved next to him, touching his shoulder. He looked up at her curiously and she nodded at him.

"It's killing me, but it's the right thing to do," she whispered. "He hasn't been ours in years. This just confirms what we've both felt."

He smiled up at her, grateful for her show of support, then he turned back to the book. An ancient looking quill suddenly appeared in his hand. Pages flipped rapidly for a moment, then settled on a particular page. Finding the correct spot on the page Arthur ran a single line through Percy's name, then he wrote a single word next to the entry "Betrayal".

There was a snapping sound and one hand fell off of the Weasley clock. Molly walked over to the clock and picked up the hand, placing it in a drawer. "I suppose I should think about getting dinner ready," she murmured absently. "Harry, will you stay? It doesn't look like your eating enough."

"I'll go floo the boys and tell them the news," Arthur said standing and picking up the Weasley book.

"Hermione, why don't you get some of that dough out of the cold box and start kneading it. I'm sure some fresh bread will go over wonderfully tonight, Ginny will..."

"I'll be happy to help, Mum," Ginny said a little forcefully. "But first I think it's important that Harry and I have a talk."

Harry blinked and looked at her warily.

Molly smiled and nodded at the pair. The events of the past hour had shocked her and she was finding what comfort she could in what was the most important thing to her, her family, even if it was a little bit smaller.

While Ginny was leading Harry out of the house and into the yard, at the Ministry, a young man with a promising future career in politics collapsed to the floor in a hallway, screaming in intense pain. And while he screamed and his magic bled off, he recalled the words his former girlfriend said to him when she broke up with him. "There are lines which you can cross and be forgiven for, Percy and then there are the ones from which there is no forgiveness, no possible path to redemption. You've just crossed one of those lines."

Around him, his coworkers watched and wondered what it meant.

Back in the Burrow's kitchen, another awkward conversation was just starting. "Mum? Are you all right? You seem awful calm," Hermione said softly. The afternoon's events had shocked her terribly. She was afraid the older woman was slipping into some sort of shock.

Molly turned back to the sink to look at her daughter to see her concern in her eyes, while she absentmindedly kneaded the dough.

Molly had worked hard to get Hermione to understand that being capable in the kitchen didn't imply any sort of subservient role for her. They'd probably still be butting heads over it, but to her surprise, Ron made a deal with her. Whenever she cooked, he'd promised to help clean up afterwards. In Hermione's mind that made it more of a partnership than the strict domestic role she seemed to think everyone wanted her to fit into. It came as a shock to her when she discovered that even Molly wasn't interested in forcing her to become a 'Molly junior', she just wanted her to be able to care for her family when the time came for her to assume the role of mistress of her own house.

"Put that aside for a moment, dear, and let's talk," said the older woman as she wiped her hands on a dish towel and sat opposite her.

"That baby in your belly represents hope for the future. When you carry her or him for as long as we do, and raise them, you wish only the best for them. What I've learned is that for a while, they're your pride and joy and you love them to pieces. But slowly they become people in their own right, with likes, desires and needs. And you find other reasons to love them and be proud of them.

"Sometimes, no matter how hard to try, the values you taught to your child become twisted. You have no choice but to watch helplessly while your child grows away from you. When you and Ron were still discussing his proposal, I saw exactly what point you were trying to make, but Ron had to discover it for himself. Had I interfered, he would have rebelled and rejected the idea entirely.

"Percy always had his own mind about matters and he seemed to focus on the trivial, as though it were the most important thing. For all of these years I hoped and prayed that he would grow like Ron did. I thought he'd come around and remember he was a Weasley first and a Ministry man second."

Molly leaned back and Hermione was surprised to see how old and tired she looked. "When the problems started, Arthur mentioned that he thought Percy was the one providing his enemies with information to hurt him, but we had no proof. That's why we never told any of the others about it. We had no proof.

"What Harry brought today was proof. Percy was estranged from this family since your fifth year in Hogwarts when he didn't want to believe Dumbledore or Harry. It turns out he was right about Dumbledore, although for different reasons. But he was never right about Harry, although he'll still claim Harry is dangerous, even today.

"To be honest, I felt we lost Percy long ago. What happened today merely made official what I already felt in my heart."

She trailed off and stared out the window for a moment. Hermione didn't know what to say in response. "One of my babies is gone forever, but another, who isn't of my blood, has returned." She nodded in direction of the window and smiled.

Hermione glanced out the window to see Harry and Ginny standing close together, talking softly and holding hands.

"Even if they can't get together, they need each other to heal the hurt between them," Hermione said quietly.

Outside the home two people were about to begin a conversation that would start a revolution.

"I'd like an explanation, Harry," Ginny said softly. She still held his hand tightly in hers and he didn't seem interested in letting her go. "You've been acting as if we're a couple again and, to be frank, it's confusing the hell out of me."

He turned to face her, standing very close. They were only inches apart. "Would that be a bad thing?" he asked.

"But what about the Ministry?"

He shook his head. "Pretend there is no marriage law, no Ministry. Part of me wants very much to have you back in my life."

She frowned slightly. "Only part?"

He looked down at his feet. "Another part says you'll only hurt me again," he whispered, then he looked up to gaze into her eyes. "Even when I thought I was going insane, I knew there was this huge aching hole in my chest that only you could fill. I thought I was over it, until I saw you again and realized just how lonely I've really been."

Ginny's eyes became bright with unshed tears and she reached up to cup his cheek. He closed his eyes and leaned into her touch. "If there was some way for me to take back those words, I would, Harry," she said softly. "Rarely a day goes by when I don't regret what I said. If it were possible, I'd spend the rest of my life making sure you know just how important you are to me."

Her hand fell to her side and she took on a defeated tone. "But that can't happen now. And as sweet as this is, it's torture for both of us."

She pulled her hand free and crossed her arms over her chest. "Pick someone from the list, Harry, and learn to be happy with them," she blurted, then she turned away and her shoulders hitched a few times.

She felt his strong arms wrap around her and she bit back a cry. "You're giving up too easily," he whispered in her ear. "What's the one thing the Ministry will never do?"

She turned in his embrace and looked up at him. He smiled at her and wiped away her tears with his thumb.

"I I I don't know," she stammered, searching his expression for hope.

"I'm going to tell you a secret, Ginny," he whispered. "If your name had been on that list, I would have jumped to issue a betrothal contract. Sure, we still hadn't made up, but I think we would have pretty quickly."

"But what about the Ministry?" she asked. "They won't stand for you going outside their list."

"The Ministry be damned!" he said hotly. "No one is going to dictate who I marry. I've already made that choice and she's standing in front of me right now."

Ginny gasped and stared up at him for a moment longer.

"If you'll have me that is," he said softly.

She burrowed into him, holding him tight.

When her head bobbed against her chest, he shook his head. "Is that a yes?" he asked.

"Yes!" she gasped out.

The pair stood for several minutes, just enjoying the feeling of closeness. When she finally felt in control of her emotions, she looked up at him. "What will you do?" she asked.

He grinned. "Trust me. If things go like I think they will, before next week is out, you'll be Mrs. Potter."

His grin was infectious. "I do trust you."

He gently released her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"Harry?" she said as they started back towards the house.

"Hmm?"

"The end of next week is less than ten days away. Will there be enough time to get everything ready? I'll need a dress, and flowers."

He stopped her and turned to face her. "First we get the Ministry off our backs, Gin. After that, if you still want a big, fancy wedding, I'll lease Westminster Abbey for you and get married again. You'll have your dress, and plenty of flowers in either case. But anything really fancy will have to wait."

She nodded. It made sense and, frankly, after five years she was tired of waiting. When he started to walk them back to the house, she stopped him again.

"Well then, can I move in with you tonight?"

He stared at her in surprise, then laughed. "If you can convince your Mum not to kill me, I'm more than willing. I have plenty of rooms and I can set you up..."

"Hold up there, Potter. My parents may be a bit old fashioned and traditional, but I intend to share the bed of my husband."

He swallowed nervously and nodded. "I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd want to... um you know, not before the wedding."

She laughed lightly and hugged his arm.

"Ginny, I want you to know that I've never..."

"Neither have I, Harry," she replied, blushing brightly. "So, we'll learn together, starting tonight."

"If your Mum and Dad don't kill me first," he muttered.

She laughed again and gently tugged on his hand.

Harry grinned nervously back at her and let himself be dragged back into the chaos that was the Burrow.

### **The Ministry of Magic, office of Undersecretary to the Minister (Two weeks later)...**

Alexander Wainwright took the folded parchment out of his in-box and unfolded it. As soon as the parchment was spread out on his desk, thick green smoke billowed from the offending document. His office door snapped shut and vanished.

In a flash, he was out of his seat and scanning the room for threats with his wand.

The lights flickered and went out, plunging the room into a gloomy, smoky darkness. The only light filtered into the room from an enchanted window.

"Is there someone there?" he asked, getting angry.

"I wouldn't..."

He whirled and snapped off an reductor curse in the direction of the voice. A shield flared on his hand suddenly felt like it was on fire. He howled and stared down at the wand that was turning white hot in his hand. His skin was searing to the burning object and he tried to release it, but his fingers wouldn't respond.

He hopped around the room screaming as the smell of burning flesh added a pungent mixture to the smoke filled room. Finally, he hit the wall with his hand hard enough to knock the burning wand from his grip and hard enough to break a number of bones.

"I did try to warn you," said the voice.

He peered around the smoke but couldn't see anything.

Harry waved a hand and the smoke cleared from the room in seconds. Wainwright looked at him and with recognition came fear. "Potter?" he whispered.

"Yes, Mr. Undersecretary. And I'm just back from a week long honeymoon."

Harry's expression turned grim. "You've been seriously irritating me for a while and I've finally decided to do something about it.

"Your Aurors are currently my guests. Perhaps someday I'll even return them to the Ministry. Tell me, Mr. Undersecretary, what would the wizarding world think about your attempting to storm my home with a large team of Aurors, all because you want me in a marriage where I'll be controlled by the use of potions?"

"No one would believe you, Potter," he snarled. "Your actions of the past five years are those of someone who is mentally unstable and a menace to society. I don't care what trollop you married, I'll force you to divorc..."

His voice cut off and he found himself pinned to a wall. He moaned as every joint in his body seemed to contort in the wrong direction.

"Yes, I know exactly what you've allowed the press to tell the wizarding world," Harry said. Then he walked over to stand next to the moaning man.

"I know who's been helping you, and since I can't convince you to leave me and my family alone, you leave me no choice but to kill you. Believe me when I tell you that I have enough power, as well as the ability to make sure your body is never found. There can't be a crime without a body.

"Just think. It will be a titillating mystery. Your secretary saw you enter your office. You had no visitors and yet you vanished without her noticing a thing."

Wainwright's eyes bulged and he looked at Harry fearfully, shaking his head. This couldn't be happening. He had planned for everything! Except this.

Harry looked at him. "What? You don't want me to kill you?"

Harry eased up on the spell contorting his joints.

"Please!"

"Yes?"

"I'll do anything! I swear it! Anything!"

Harry pretended to think about it for a moment, then he pulled a parchment out of his robe and with a flourish he placed it on Wainwright's desk with a blood quill on top of it. "Fine, sign that and I'll let you live."

With a nod from Harry, he slumped to the floor, gasping in pain. He slowly got to his knees and crawled over to the desk. He picked up the quill and started to read. As he did, his heart began to beat faster.

Potter had discovered everything and had laid it out in the document. It was part confession and part unbreakable vow. Once he signed the document, he would have exactly seven days to leave his job and flee the country. Potter made it abundantly clear that he left no room to wriggle free. The punishment clauses were extremely harsh, but he was stuck. Either he signed or Potter would kill him.

Harry cast a mild numbing charm on his hand and he reached for the quill. Wainwright winced as the blood quill cut deeply into the back of his hand. Apparently Potter had obtained one of the older blood quills that could overcome pain numbing charms. When he was done, the parchment glowed a bright white and rolled up, then floated back to Harry's open hand.

Harry nodded and a set of glowing numbers appeared on Wainwright's other hand. It read "168". He stared at the number in confusion, then he look at Harry.

"That's the number of hours you have before you must leave Britain. After that, clause 18 will come into effect and I really don't think you'd like to experience exploding testicles."

Wainwright whimpered and stared at him in horror. He never imagined the man could be so ruthless! Everything he had learned about him suggested that he was honorable to a fault; a true Gryffindor who was reluctant to use his powers on people.

"I would avoid coming into contact with me in the future, otherwise I might really get mad," Harry said, then he faded from view without a sound. Almost instantly the office returned to normal.

Wainwright nearly sobbed with relief and thought he might have dreamed the whole episode, but the glowing numbers on the back of his hand and the returning pain in the other convinced him. It was no dream.

### **The Minister's Mansion (Later that night)...**

Cornelius Fudge shrieked and bolted from his bed. The young girl in his bed whinnied again and writhed on the bed as the Transfiguration spell wore off.

Reverting back into a pony, the animal stood unsteadily on the bed, which promptly collapsed, causing the animal to panic. With a snort, she leaped off the bed and hit a wall, head on.

The bedroom door swung open and the pony shook her head before spotting the opening and bolting through the door.

Still shocked, Cornelius slid down one wall, staring at the back of what had once been his willing bed partner. She hadn't been very communicative, but he chalked that up to the Imperius curse that was used to control her.

"You know, people end up in Azkaban for cursing muggles," said a voice next to him.

With another shriek, he jumped to his feet. The door to the room slammed shut, then glowed faintly as the wood of the door fused into the wall, making it appear as if there was never a door there at all.

"Fortunately, I found the young muggle girl you had drugged down in the basement and freed her earlier. I then replaced her with the pony. Sadly, my Transfiguration spells rarely last more than 24 hours," Harry said quietly, then his expression hardened and he gazed at Fudge intently.

Harry wasn't about to admit that he had triggered the pony reverting to normal form. His transfigurations were spot on, but Fudge didn't need to know that.

"You... you... you can't be in here," Fudge stammered. "Guards! Guards!"

"If you haven't figured it out by now, they can't hear you, Cornelius. I could rip out your eyeballs and roast them over a fire and they still wouldn't hear your screams," Harry said calmly.

Fudge whimpered and cowered back from him, realizing this wasn't the meek boy he'd put on trial, nor the shocked, horror stricken war survivor.

This was Harry Potter, the Harry Potter, the man who killed Voldemort and wiped out twenty percent of the old pure blood families in the process.

To Harry, those families had been mere road blocks, preventing him from dealing with Voldemort. He'd crashed through them, leaving few survivors, and now he'd turned that power on him!

He tried to dash to his dresser and grab his wand, only to find he had no traction. Looking down, he discovered that he was floating six inches off the floor.

"Considering the letters you've been sending me of late, Cornelius, I'd say there's an issue we need to address. I do not appreciate being ordered to marry anyone. To be honest, it makes my wife quite cranky. You're lucky I'm the one talking to you right now. If it were her, she'd just slice you open and set the room on fire."

Fudge stared at him. "Wife? You're not married, Potter. I know that for a fact! And where are my Aurors?"

Harry shook his head. "Imagine my surprise when I return to my tower after enjoying a pleasant honeymoon with my wife only to discover that you had ordered a number of Aurors to storm my home. You're in no position to demand anything, Cornelius. However, I will humor you for a moment and tell you that your Aurors are safe and will be released, unharmed, in three centuries. Sooner, if you cooperate. But for now, they are held in stasis in a null temporal dimension. It's quite a handy little discovery I made, great for keeping your lunch warm, or your Aurors alive and un-aging."

Fudge's eyes bulged in fear. Potter was talking about removing one quarter of the Auror force and holding them for centuries! It was a public relations disaster! He couldn't hide the loss of that many Aurors from the public.

Harry grinned. "As to my wife, I am married. I was married to Ginevra Molly Weasley in a muggle ceremony that was broadcast live on muggle cable TV." He shook his head. "The Americans are really a strange sort. Did you know that they have a television show where they'll accept any challenge and see it through to completion or refund all your costs? When I offered them a large budget they jumped at the chance to put together a wedding in Las Vegas in just under five days. I understand the ratings were quite favorable. Personally, I think that was due to seeing a very hot red head in a skimpy bathing suit."

Fudge shook his head in confusion. Potter was married? In a muggle ceremony?

"It's not legal," snapped Fudge. "You already knew you had to pick a bride from our list!"

Harry smiled. "And that's the beauty of it, my dear Minister. You're going to make it legal."

"Me? Why should I?" Fudge retorted. He was starting to feel like he was on safe territory here. And he was Minister for Magic. His word was law. The list was law!

Harry leaned closer. "Because I own you, lock, stock and barrel. If you don't start doing what I tell you to do, you'll find that the press has photos of yourself with that pony. My camera won't show her in the transfigured state either. Oh, no. She'll be there in all her equine glory. And I could always

have your intended victim file a complaint with the ICW. After all, with you being Minister, she can't be certain of getting justice unless she goes outside of the country for it. Your position as Minister will probably last five minutes, once her testimony hits the tabloids. Not that it would survive your romp with the pony, but it would probably make your intended victim feel much better as she watched you hauled away in chains."

Harry's grin broadened. "Finally, by your own policy and because of your irrational fear of the muggles, you have made it illegal for any part of the government, including yourself, to interfere with muggle legal proceedings. The muggle legal system is so complex and difficult for you to understand that you're afraid you can't remove all traces of something."

He shook his head. "You're so afraid that the muggles might find out about us that you made it illegal to tamper with their government. My marriage is totally legal and registered in the great state of Nevada, U.S.A.. And before you say it, the paperwork has already been filled out and filed with the Registrars office in London."

Fudge's shoulders slumped in defeat. Potter was right; he owned him.

"But Wainwright..."

"Wainwright will be resigning due to poor health," Harry murmured. "He contracted a serious case of impending doom earlier today. I suggest that you think about asking Arthur Weasley to assume his position. He's fully qualified for the job and he'll be able to help you fill all the positions that are about to become vacant. I do believe a number of Wainwright's compatriots will be leaving government service shortly."

Harry watched Fudge cave and wither under his gaze. He wasn't about to tell the man that if he could arrange it, Arthur would be assuming the position of Minister of Magic before the year was out. He had learned several important lessons from the war, and one was never trust someone that was willing to switch sides. Even if he had to be blackmailed into it.

Harry walked over to where the door used to be and it slowly reappeared. He turned to face Cornelius. "What you tell the public about your missing Aurors is your business. Leave me out of it or I will happily see your career in public service end with a Dementor's kiss. If you play nice, I'll turn them loose in a few weeks."

Fudge nodded dejectedly. He couldn't hide a missing twenty five man Auror force for long.

Harry eyed him for a moment, then he turned, opened the door and walked from the room.

Fudge let out an explosive breath and sank to the floor. He was ruined. It was just a matter of time and he knew it. He had fallen for Wainwright's plan to control Potter and now Potter was controlling him.

From somewhere downstairs came the sound of breaking glass and a horse whinnying. He flinched at the sound, not knowing he was listening to the destruction of his mother's favorite antique china.

### **The Black Tower...**

Harry reappeared in the small sitting room just off his bedroom and marveled at the changes that had been made in just a few short days. Ginny hadn't moved in the night that he proposed, but she did move in the next night. Molly's complaint was easily rectified when Harry showed up the next day with a five carat engagement ring, making it 'official'.

Once she had installed herself in his bedroom, she had begun a very modest plan to turn the tower into a home. A rug here, curtains there, some photos and paintings. Ginny moved slowly making changes to each room, transforming them from strict utilitarian to comfortable.

The corridor with all the doors she left alone when she learned that that entire area of the tower was temporally distorted. There were literally hundreds of rooms and the magic was continuing to add more every day. Harry used a few of the rooms, like the Visitor's room, but the rest were either gateways to other places, or empty. He had a number of the rooms set up so he could run experiments in them that weren't safe to be run elsewhere.

The first time she opened a door to find herself looking out over some unnamed planet and Frick had to stop her from stepping through, she decided to leave the corridor alone. It was Harry's domain and she would not touch anything of his without first asking him.

On a more personal level, she and Harry explored the sexual aspect of their relationship. After the war, both that been too mentally hurt to jump into having sex. It was a decision that they later agreed had been the right one. Together they decided to wait the week before taking that final step, but short of making love, there was little else they didn't do. Ginny found Harry to be a considerate and gentle lover and was surprised by the intensity of his emotions while they were exploring each other.

Like so many other endeavors, Harry threw all he had into making love. Ginny discovered that it truly was a magical experience.

As for Harry, the last two weeks had been a radical shift in his life. It was as if his entire life had been off kilter and then Ginny moved in. At that point, everything seemed to shift and life clicked into place. The "great numbness" as he called it, was torn away and everything came into sharp relief.

Ginny, he found, was a perfect counter point to his moodiness. With her around, it wasn't possible for him to be moody. She seemed to know instinctively what he needed. He only hoped he could someday be as good at reading her as she was at reading him.

They talked about that a scant two days before they got married and he admitted that he needed her to guide him where her needs were concerned. He wanted very much to please her, outside of the bedroom and in.

He glanced down at the knitted blanket she kept by the couch for when she was chilly and her book on the table. The room seemed more alive,

thanks to her touch. The photos of Harry and his friends at Hogwarts, pictures of his parents and even a painting of a mountain scene warmed the room. He had to admit that up until she had moved in, the room was more functional than anything else.

Surprisingly, Frick wholeheartedly approved of her and was fully involved in her decorating schemes.

Laying his cloak on the back of a chair, he entered the bedroom and kicked off his shoes.

“How did it go?” she said sleepily from the bed.

“I thought for sure you'd be asleep by now.”

She shook her head. “I know we're newlyweds and everything is still brand new, but I've already discovered I don't like sleeping without you in the bed with me.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and gently ran his fingers against her cheek.

“So, how did it go?” she repeated.

He could hear the faint hint of worry in her voice and he smiled. “The Minister has a new Master and he'll follow orders. I thought that just getting married in the muggle world would make us safe, but I found something even better.”

She propped herself up on her elbows and the covers slipped down, exposing her bare breasts. “Oh?”

He tore his eyes from her exposed breasts to look into her eyes and noticed that she was grinning at him. She knew exactly what effect she had on him. She knew also that his naked form had the same exact effect on her.

“Blackmail. It seems the Minister had an unsavory habit of capturing young muggle girls and putting them under an Imperius curse so that he could 'play' with them. Probably afterwards he'd *Obliviate* them and they'd be none the wiser.”

Ginny's eyes widened in shock and anger. Her anger slowly faded as he explained what he did to Fudge, and how he'd freed Fudge's captive, replacing her with a transfigured pony. By the time he got to the point where the spell wore off, she was laughing outright.

Harry grinned at her laughter and started to undress for bed. Ginny watched him with hungry eyes as he undressed. Noting his obvious arousal, she shook her head. “I don't think you're ready for sleep just yet.”

He leaned across the bed and kissed her. “Sleep?No. But I am ready for you,” he whispered against her lips. She shivered in delight and wrapped her arms around him and pulled him down on top of her.

“And I'm ready for you,” she whispered back.

## **The Burrow...**

Hermione paused on the steps and her hands rubbed at her aching lower back. She was now nearly eight months pregnant and she was certain that she could get a job walking around a stadium with the words “Goodyear” on her side.

Harry got the joke, but the rest of the family was clueless. Worse, Molly was upset that she would put herself down so. Ron repeatedly told her she was beautiful, especially now. She didn't feel beautiful. She felt ugly and fat...and wondered rather sadly if she'd ever fit into a pair of jeans again. Her back hurt all the time now, her breasts were swollen and she hadn't seen her feet since Harry and Ginny's wedding nearly a month ago.

Their marriage had been an experience unlike anything the Weasley family had ever gone through. Harry had taken the entire family to Las Vegas, minus Percy, of course, who was still suffering the aftereffects of his expulsion from the family.

They arrived three days ahead of the planned service and for the next three days were swept up in a veritable orgy of organizing for a televised wedding. The television show spent Harry's money like it was water, but in the end, everyone, including Molly, were ecstatic with the results.

On a more personal note, the Weasleys were treated to life as a welcome guest of a five star hotel. Arthur found the muggle slot machines fascinating and despite Harry arranging for a very large line of credit for him, he spent a majority of his time playing the nickel slots.

Ginny and Molly spent most of their time leading up to the ceremony looking at wedding dresses. Ginny also got her first exposure to a muggle bikini. Her selection was modest, but still far too revealing in her mother's opinion. On the other hand, Harry had taken one look at her in the suit and had had trouble breathing, let alone talking. Thinking was absolutely out of the question.

Although Hermione would never tell Harry or Ginny, it was seeing Harry's reaction to Ginny that had brought on a bit of depression. With just over a month until her due date, she felt huge and ungainly and it affected everything she did.

The physical side of her relationship with Ron was suffering badly. No matter how much he wanted her, she refused to believe he could be attracted to her enlarged form. When Ron had finally had enough of her foolishness, he made a comment that set her off. The fight had spilled over into the next day and would probably still be going on, except that Harry had dropped by and taken steps to end it.

*He had arrived to drop off photos from the wedding when he found Molly weeping softly in the kitchen. Upstairs, he could hear Hermione screaming, presumably at Ron.*

*“She's so upset and nothing we say is calming her,” Molly said through her tears. She wrung her hands, expressing her helplessness. “She*



won't take a calming draught. I've tried to talk her into one, but she's just not listening."

Harry nodded and winced at an especially foul string of swear words echoing down from above. He was shocked that Hermione even knew how to swear like that. He had never heard her swear and was sure they could hear her up at Hogwarts.

"It's the pregnancy, Molly. Hermione is used to being in control of her life and suddenly it's been wrested from her. I'll talk to her, if I have to I'll cast a calming and cheering charm on her," he replied with a grim expression. "She's endangering herself and the baby when she's like this."

Molly nodded and gave him a grateful smile.

He turned and walked resolutely from the room.

He stepped into Ron and Hermione's room and took in the scene before him. Ron looked torn between being angry and being hurt. Hermione sat on the bed in a nightgown that no longer fit well enough. She was running out of steam and had wound down to muffled sobs.

Ron looked at Harry for a moment, then he turned away. Harry could tell she had finally pushed Ron to his breaking point. He stared out the window, his fists clenched tightly. He was one step from a full blown Weasley explosion and was barely holding it in.

Harry frowned and he walked over to where Hermione sat. He crouched down so that he was eye level with her and ran a quick wandless diagnostic on her. Both she and the baby were stressed, but he didn't think they were in any danger unless things continued.

He brushed her hair away from her face and in doing so, cast a very light calming charm on her. She looked up in surprise. "Harry?" she whispered.

He grinned at her. "Hey sis, what's the problem?"

She sniffled and wrapped her arms around her bugling belly. "I'm so ugly!" she shouted, startling Harry so much that he fell over. "And it's his fault!" she hissed angrily in Ron's direction.

Harry got up on his knees. "Knock it off!" he snapped. Suddenly the room was awash with ambient magic and Hermione looked at him with a touch of fear.

Harry took a calming breath, then he turned to Ron. "Do you think she's ugly, Ron?"

Ron shook his head, but didn't speak. She had hurt him and he was afraid of what he might say if he started talking.

"Why don't you believe him?" Harry asked Hermione.

"How can he? I wasn't pretty to start with and now I'm fat, I hurt all the time, I'm tired and my back aches. He comes home from a long day and he wants to climb into bed and cuddle with me and I can't stand him touching me when I'm like this!"

Harry shook his head and smiled sadly at her. One of her greatest self doubts concerned how she perceived herself, it had always been the case and it still was. He reached out and cupped her cheek, as he did, he reinforced the calming charm again.

"Ron?"

"Yeah, mate?" Ron said from the window.

"Come over here. I can't help fix this while you're all the way over there."

"Just what are you doing, Harry Potter?" asked Hermione staring at him warily. He placed a finger on her lips, silencing her.

Once he sensed Ron standing nearby, he took Hermione's hand in his own. "Ordinarily, I would never get involved in your fights. That's something I learned back in school. Never get involved and never take a side. But this is different," he said softly, then his expression turned serious. "Hermione, the emotional state you find yourself in is causing problems for you and your baby."

Her eyes widened and he nodded grimly at her. "You only have a little longer to go, but the problem is right now you feel trapped. You have always had a problem understanding someone else's viewpoint and I think, deep down, even though you love Ron, you still never believed him when he told you how pretty you really are."

She looked down and her cheeks turned scarlet.

Harry reached up with his free hand and grabbed Ron's hand. "Do you both trust me?" he asked.

"You know I do, mate," Ron replied.

Hermione nodded her head, but wouldn't look at either of them.

Harry closed his eyes and muttered something under his breath. His hands glowed a soft blue and a line of light appeared, connecting Ron and Hermione. Both inhaled sharply and stared at each other.

Harry released their hands and stood. "It will only last few hours, but while it does, each of you will feel the other in ways unlike anything you've ever experienced. You both need to see what the other person is going through," Harry said softly, then he turned and moved to the door. Once there, he stopped and spoke again. "I really suggest you talk to each other, but for now, feel what the other feels and learn to understand. Contact Frick if you need me."

Neither Ron nor Hermione said anything. Both were staring at each other.

"I can feel your love," she whispered to him. "And the hurt I've caused. Oh, Ron, I'm so sorry."

He tried to look away so she couldn't see the tears start. He could feel her doubts and her own disgust at how she looked, and then her sorrow for the pain she had caused him. He wondered how she could feel that way about herself when she was giving him the greatest gift ever.

She tugged on his hand and he fell to his knees in front of her. She pulled him into her embrace, all the while marveling over the powerful emotions he felt for her. Despite her own misgivings, she could feel the attraction he had for her. In his mind, she was beautiful and sexy. It astounded her to discover that he thought she looked even better because she was pregnant with their child. Even after their fight and the pain she caused him, he still loved her and wanted her with an intensity that left her breathless.

Hermione smiled to herself, recalling that eventful night. That fight and Harry's intervention had been a turning point in her pregnancy. Both Ron and herself came away from those hours spent in seclusion with a far better understanding of each other. It had been the most intense time of their lives as a couple and when it was over she took him to bed and held him, reveling in his strength and content in the knowledge that he loved her above everything else.

A sudden thump caught her attention and she changed direction, heading into the kitchen instead of the living room. She stopped, her heart caught in her throat when she saw the still figure of Molly laying on the floor.

She opened her mouth to scream when a wand point pressed up the back of her head.

"Frick!" she said loudly, then there was a flash of light and she slumped to the floor. It was a desperate gamble on her part, and luckily for both Molly and herself, it paid off.

Her next impression was that of having a major migraine headache. "Oooohh," she moaned and rolled over on the bed.

"Drink this," said a very familiar voice. A hand gently lifted her head off the pillow and a potion bottle was placed against her lips.

"Ginny?" she whispered after drinking the potion.

Ginny gently lowered her head back down to the pillow. "You're safe now and the pain should go away in a few moments."

She looked around the unfamiliar room and turned her gaze back to Ginny. "Harry brought you and Mum to our place, Harry felt it would be safer and I agree with him. Mum's fine. Like you, she has a headache, but that's understandable. And before you fret any, Harry's checked and the baby is just fine."

Hermione started to sit up when Ginny pressed her firmly back into the mattress. "Harry said you should rest for today. He'll be up in a bit. He's also called your healer to let her know what happened so don't be surprised if you find yourself having an unscheduled visit from her. Like Harry says, he has the knowledge of a number of healers, but he's not one himself."

"Where's Ron?"

"Ron and Dad are with Harry right now. I expect that they are probably in the company of several Aurors, as well," Ginny replied, then she stood and walked over to a night table and poured Hermione a cup of tea.

"Ginny, what happened?"

"Remember when the Ministry tried to break up your marriage to Ron?" Ginny asked softly.

She nodded.

"It seems that the individual who was interested in you wasn't happy with the Ministry's decision to leave you and Ron alone. He arranged for an attack on Ron today, and one on you. We suspect that you would have been forced to abort the baby. And with Ron out of the picture, you would have been free to marry again."

Hermione gasped and her face turned white. "Ron! Is he..."

Ginny made a shushing motion with her hands. "He's fine. The wizard that attacked him never took into account that he had been trained to fight by Harry and Mad-Eye Moody. Ron's got a few singe marks, but otherwise he's in much better shape than his attacker. Now that man is seriously wishing he had never been hired and is singing like a canary to the Aurors.

"The man that attacked you and Mum still hasn't woke up. Harry was a little upset and his stunner was strong enough to stun a whole Quidditch stadium full of people. He also had a note on him from the person that hired him, along with his payment."

Ginny sat on a chair next to the bed and sipped her tea. She motioned for Hermione to take a drink.

Hermione sipped, while her mind churned with the information Ginny had given her. It didn't make any sense to her and she said as much to her sister-in-law.

"That's because you're not thinking like an old line pure blood," Harry said from the door. Behind him stood Ron, who had a bandage on his cheek and his robes were torn, but otherwise he looked fine. She put her tea down on the night table and held her arms out to him.

Ron hurried to her side and the couple clung to each other for a few minutes before Hermione looked over at Harry. "What did you mean by that remark?"

"Hermione, you might not like the idea, but you are a commodity in the eyes of some pure bloods. Ginny and I will have a family in a few years. That much I'm certain. But any man looking at a woman as a possible means to continue his line would see you as valuable because you have proven you can get pregnant."

She shivered in Ron's arms and he tightened his grip around her. "That's a hateful way of looking at things," she murmured.

Harry shrugged. "It is, but that's exactly what Emilio Zabini said when we talked to him. You can thank your father-in-law for the fact that your husband and I aren't going to prison tonight. It was Arthur that kept us from killing him."

Hermione turned to look at her husband. "Ron?"

"He hurt you and he wanted to hurt our baby," he said simply. Ron's anger was still perilously close to the surface. He had wanted to kill Zabini, and Harry would have gleefully held the man down for him. Only Arthur's calming presence and advice prevented a greater tragedy.

She stared at him for a moment, considering all she had learned about him since they married. The Weasleys were big on family and he was no different in that regard. Normally rather laid back, even Arthur would become enraged when his family was at stake.

Nodding slowly, she turned back to Harry. "So, what happens now?"

"The Aurors have a lot of evidence from those free lance hit wizards, but they will probably interrogate Zabini using Veratiserum. From what I could gather, we went to school with his younger brother, Blaise Zabini. He talked about you frequently at home and you caught Emilio's interest for your role in the war effort."

Harry frowned. "I wouldn't be surprised if we discover there is corruption in the Ministry Marriage office. He seemed mighty sure that he could get a Ministry ordered marriage, once Ron and the baby had been eliminated. It smacks heavily of bribery, if you ask me."

Hermione placed a hand protectively on her belly and tightened her grip on Ron. Harry moved over to sit on the arm of the chair where Ginny sat. She reached up and took his hand in hers.

"As for you and Molly, you're both recovering from a powerful stunner, shot at point blank range. Aside from the headache, there'll be no lasting damage," Harry concluded, then he grinned. "As much as Ginny and I hoped we'd be able to get you guys over for dinner, this isn't what we had envisioned. I'd suggest planning on spending an evening here. Relax, have a meal and a hot bath if you feel up to it, Hermione. Molly and Arthur are planning on staying the night, too."

"Harry, mate, I don't know what to say, except thanks," Ron said softly. "You..."

"Don't thank me, Ron. Thank your wife for doing the one thing she could have without a wand. She called a house elf who had been instructed to respond to her calls. Frick was smart enough to see what was happening quickly and called me."

"Still," Ron said, persisting.

"It's all right, Ron," Ginny said, jumping in for Harry. "We know what you're trying to say."

Harry looked down at her in surprise for a moment, then he turned and nodded to Ron. "I may be a Potter, but it was the Weasleys who taught me that family is the most important thing. You and Hermione are family," Harry replied softly.

"So are you," Hermione replied tearfully. "And don't you ever forget it."

Ginny rubbed Harry's back affectionately. "He won't."

He smiled. It had been a long time coming, but everything finally felt right. Hermione would have her baby. Conditions for the Weasleys were improving considerably. Ginny had quit her job at the Ministry to assume the role of cleaning up all of Harry's research notes before they went to Hermione.

It was probable that in the near future, they'd be marketing some very profitable new spells.

Arthur was heading back to his old job and had already been tasked with finding replacements for a rash of resignations. The elder Weasley had his suspicions about the cause of the resignations but wisely kept them to himself. He had noticed that neither Ginny nor Harry had looked surprised when he had announced that he'd gotten his old job back.

Harry leaned back and felt Ginny adjust in the chair so he could fit better. The pair snuggled together and sat talking with Ron and Hermione.

Things weren't perfect, but life was good right now.

