

A Fox's Tale

Harry and Ron smiled wearily at Dobby when he opened the door for them. It was late, and they were exhausted after a full, hard day of Quidditch practice and an even harder evening of classes at Auror School. They hung their brooms carefully on the broom rack near the door – they'd learned from their team mates that professional-quality brooms were never stood upright, but were hung up to protect the integrity of those all-important bristles – then trudged into the library and fell into their favourite chairs, slumping into the comfortable cushions, long legs stretched out in front of them, their bags filled with school books, parchment and Quidditch playbooks dropped haphazardly by their chairs. Merlin flew from Harry's shoulder to his perch, where he immediately tucked his head under his wing and went to sleep.

"I can't move," Ron groaned.

"Me ne-e-either," Harry said in the midst of a jaw-cracking yawn. He smacked his lips tiredly, then muttered, "Sorry." He was nearly asleep when Ron spoke again.

"House is too quiet."

"Nice, isn't it?" Harry said with a fleeting smile. There had been far too much yelling in his home lately, although never when he was in the room, now that he thought about it. He shook his head and dismissed the idea, too tired to care at the moment.

"Something must be wrong," Ron said, frowning as he forced himself to sit up and look around. "Dobby? Where is everybody?" he asked the house-elf, who had entered the library with a tray bearing drinks for the young men.

"Mr. and Mrs. Weasley is still at the construction site for the Burrow," Dobby replied, "and Miss Ginny and Miss 'Mione is upstairs."

"They must not have heard us come in," Harry commented. He took a bottle of butterbeer from the tray with a grateful smile at the elf. "Thanks, Dobby. You're brilliant, you know."

The elf's ears stood at full attention, his eyes wide as he stared at his master. "Dobby is brilliant?"

Harry saluted him with his bottle. "Yes. I needed this. Thanks."

Dobby smiled, his huge green eyes watering with joy. "Dobby is happy to please his master."

"Yeah, thanks, Dobby," Ron agreed, having nearly finished the drink with one long swallow. He belched loudly. "Oops, sorry," he said, his ears flaming red. Harry just laughed.

"Ron? Is that you? Are you home?" Hermione called.

"Yeah! In the library," he replied. "Hi," he said with a warm smile as she entered the room. "Did you have a good day?"

"It was OK," she replied, bending to kiss him.

"You look knackered," Ginny said sympathetically as she moved toward Harry.

"Actually, I was thinking that 'shattered' was a better word for how I feel," Harry sighed. "Having Quidditch practice and Auror School on the same days sounded so reasonable when we set it up. I don't know how I'm going to survive these hours."

"Me neither," Ron agreed, pulling Hermione into his lap and tucking her head under his chin. "Ah, this is better."

"Mmm," Harry agreed while still kissing Ginny. When they broke the kiss, he kissed her nose lightly and rested his cheek on her hair. "I could get used to this."

"Me too," she said, snuggling into his arms.

"Gin – don't wriggle, OK?" he whinged. "I'm too tired to appreciate it."

"Oh, my poor exhausted baby," she cooed. "No energy left for play?"

"Not much." He sighed and rested his cheek on her hair again, glad as always that she fitted so comfortably in his arms.

"How's the construction going?" Ron said. "Mum and Dad staying out of your hair better now?"

"Sometimes," Hermione said, sighing. "I know they mean well—"

"Mum's driving us crazy!" Ginny grumbled. "She keeps trying to set rules, gives us 'busywork' to do, not anything useful, just stuff to keep us out of trouble! As if we were going to get in trouble! Really! And she talks to us as if we're children! She can't seem to accept the fact that we're adults now!" Her temper flared as she spoke.

"Well, 'Mione is, anyway," Ron teased. "You're still Mum's ickle baby girl."

"No, I'm not!" Ginny's face was stormy as she glared at her brother. "She needs to remember we've grown up!"

"That's my warrior princess," Harry said, chuckling as he hugged her. "Always ready for another battle."

"No, I'm not, not really. I mean, I know Mum's been through a lot, losing Bill and Percy, losing the house, but we've all been through the same thing!" Ginny said, sitting up and banging her fists on her knees in frustration. "She and Dad have been gone since teatime. The only reason they left us behind is that I said I had a headache and wanted to sleep, and Hermione said she still had decisions to make about her classes at Oxford. It's the first peace we've had since we got back from school a whole month ago!"

"I didn't realize it was that bad," Harry said in concern. Everything usually seemed to be fine when he was home, although he did hear Molly shouting from time to time.

Ginny seemed to read his mind. “Mum behaves differently when you’re home. You’re not only the Boy-Who-Lived and all that, but you’re our host. She’s driving us both round the bend.”

“You know, my mum told me,” Hermione began, then sniffled and sighed before going on. Her pain over the deaths of her parents was still a raw wound in her heart. She swallowed hard, and then soldiered on. “She said it never works to have too many grown women in the same house. There’s always competition for who’s in charge, who’s the boss, that kind of thing. Poor Dobby and Winky are trying to keep everyone happy, but it’s just difficult. Dobby thinks Ginny should be in charge when you aren’t here, Harry, since she’s going to be your wife, but whenever Ginny asks them to do something, her mum countermands it.”

Harry frowned. “That’s just not on. Dobby’s right. Ginny’s the woman of this house.”

“I am?” Ginny said, quirking an eyebrow at her fiancé.

“You are.” As he gazed at her, his frown softened into a soft, loving smile. “Wife. I like the sound of that,” he murmured, nuzzling Ginny’s neck.

“Mmm, me too,” she murmured, leaning into his lips.

“Shall we leave you two alone?” Hermione teased just as Ron decided to follow Harry’s example and snog his fiancé.

Before Harry could answer, he heard the sound of voices near the front door. “They’re back.”

Both girls sighed.

“Tell you what,” Harry said. “Tomorrow, the four of us will go and do something fun away from here. All right?”

“YES!” the girls chorused.

“Harry, we have homework for Auror School and plays to learn for Quidditch,” Ron reminded him.

“We’ll just have to do it tonight.”

“Oh, but you’re so tired!” Ginny said, sorry she’d dumped her problems on him.

“I’ll have a talk with your mum, too,” Harry said, helping Ginny to her feet. He pushed his glasses up onto his forehead and rubbed his eyes tiredly, then adjusted his glasses and stood up. “May as well get that over with.”

“But—”

“Don’t. I’d take any reason to avoid this, but now that you’ve pointed it out, I can see how unhappy Dobby and Winky are, not to mention you two. I noticed things were tense, but I didn’t realize it was so bad. I was too wrapped up in starting with the Lions and Auror School to pay attention to the

problems here.” He waved away the objections they started to raise. “No, don’t make excuses for me. I should have been paying attention. I’m sorry, Gin, Hermione. I should have noticed. Now I understand why Winky barely leaves the kitchen anymore. I won’t let anyone upset you girls or the elves. I’ll take care of it.” His face as grim as if he were about to face a mortal enemy, Harry strode out of the library hoping to have a *quiet* chat with his future mother-in-law.

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Harry, dear, how are you?” Molly said as she lifted the tea kettle from the stove and poured water in the teapot to steep. “You look tired.”

“It was a long, hard day,” he admitted as he sat down at the table. “How’s the construction coming? The girls said you were over there.”

“It’s slow,” Arthur said, dropping into a chair and rubbing his eyes wearily. “They’re just getting started, and we changed the design again, so that’s going to slow things even more.”

“Why’d you change the design?” Harry said. “I thought you had everything worked out.”

“Molly wanted to rearrange the floor plan – again.” Arthur sighed. Molly was grieving hard for her lost sons, and trying to distract herself with the plans for the new Burrow. But she had loved the ramshackle old house and couldn’t decide if she wanted to rebuild what they’d had or build something different. She also wanted it built as soon as possible, so now they were dealing with a very confused construction crew.

Harry bit the inside of his cheek and crossed his fingers under the table. “I need to talk to you two.”

“Certainly, dear! What can we do for you?” Molly said, settling into a seat beside Arthur at the kitchen table. She’d gone straight to the kitchen and started poking around in the fridge when they’d returned, apparently ignoring the sandwiches that Winky had waiting for them. Now Winky sat silently in a corner, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, watching the proceedings with wide, nervous eyes, Dobby’s arm around her narrow shoulders.

After a quick glance at his unhappy elves, Harry steeled himself and began. “I invited you to live here until your new house is complete, and I was glad to do it. But there are a few problems that we need to deal with.”

Molly leaned forward, paying close attention. “What problems, dear? Anything I can do to help?”

“Now that you mention it, yes,” he said, glad she’d created such a natural opening for him. “The problem is, the elves aren’t happy, the girls aren’t happy, and I can’t allow that.”

Molly frowned in confusion. “Why aren’t they happy?”

“Erm” Now that he’d come to it, Harry was uncertain how to explain without hurting her feelings.

Arthur saw Harry’s discomfort and stepped in. “Is there some confusion about the rules of the house, perhaps?”

Harry brightened. “That’s it exactly! Yes.” He looked seriously at Molly. “The elves are trying to do what everyone wants, but they’re my elves and they know the rules I’ve established. You seem to be telling them to do things differently, or trying to do things yourself that they’re used to doing. When I’m not here, the elves think Ginny should be in charge, since she’s going to be my wife, but apparently you’re overriding whatever she tells

them.” He paused, gathering his thoughts again.

Molly sat back in shock, her mouth working soundlessly, making her look a bit like a beached fish. “But—” she sputtered when she found her voice.

“Please, let me finish. Then we can talk about it, OK?”

She nodded, her mouth a thin, angry line, her eyes hurt.

Harry ran a hand roughly through his hair, wishing he was anywhere but here. He took a deep breath and went on.

“We’ve been through a lot of experiences that make all four of us a lot older than our years, y’know?” Arthur nodded, while Molly looked thoughtful . . . fuming, hurt and thoughtful, Harry realized. *Nothing to do but get on with it.* “We aren’t children. We’d like to be treated like the adults we are.”

There. He’d said it. Molly and her curfews and her comments about how they dressed, their hair, the couples’ shows of affection for each other – all of that had to stop. Harry hoped he’d made his point and wouldn’t have to go into any more detail.

Molly sat staring at him for a long moment, then said “I see” very carefully. “We’ll be out of here in the morning, Harry. You won’t have to deal with us anymore.” She got up from the table, her body stiff as she tried not to cry.

“You don’t have to move out,” Harry said quickly, placing a gentle hand on her arm. “That isn’t what I want. I offered to let you stay, and I meant it. But please – I know you’re going through a lot right now. Could you please remember that we’re all in pain, as well? If we give each other some space, we’ll manage. And that includes the elves. Let them do their jobs, please? It makes them so happy to serve us. They were unable to serve me very often when I was away at school, and now I’m so busy, I’m not here much. But taking care of my home and fixing meals makes them happy, so please, Mrs. Weasley, allow them that pleasure, OK?” She said nothing, but simply stood there, her back ramrod straight, her face stiff and defensive. “And please, give the girls and Ron and me our freedom to do what we want. We’re engaged to be married, we love each other, and there will be a lot of snogging going on here. That’s just the way it is. We want to celebrate being alive! This is my first real home, and I want it to be a happy one. I think we’ve earned the right to live the way we want to. Can you accept the fact that we’re adults now?”

Molly’s face was reddening, her eyes flashing with fury as her temper finally snapped. “I . . . Ginny is most definitely not an adult!”

“Yes, she is,” Arthur said, his voice gentle and soothing. “She is. Accept it, Molly.”

“No! And I didn’t do anything wrong! I was just trying to help!” she cried. She drew herself up, cloaking herself in all the dignity she could muster. She started to say something else, then clamped her mouth shut and shook her head. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Harry. Thank you for your hospitality.” She sniffed, trying to stem the tide of her tears, then turned and strode out of the kitchen.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur sighed. “She’s taken everything so hard.”

“Losing two children has to be awful for both of you,” Harry said, his heart going out to the man. “Ginny and Ron have lost two brothers, and Hermione’s lost her parents. We’re all in pain. It’s natural that we’d get on each other’s nerves a bit. We just need to be more considerate of each other.”

“You’re very wise,” Arthur said, smiling at the young man. “I suppose I’d better go and see how she is.”

"I'm sorry I upset her. I wish—"

"Don't worry about it. It had to happen sometime." Arthur got wearily to his feet and trudged after his wife.

A few moments later, Harry plodded into the library and dropped into his chair with a thud.

"It went that well, eh?" Ron's voice was playful, but his eyes were anxious.

"Yeah." Harry pulled Ginny into his arms and buried his face in her hair. After a long moment, he sighed and said, "I think I'll just stay like this for the rest of my life."

"You'll get hungry," Ginny said, trying to play with him.

"No, I won't," he insisted, gnawing on her neck a bit, making her giggle.

"Are you going to tell us what happened?" Hermione said.

"I think you can guess, can't you?"

"Oh, come on, tell us!" Hermione insisted. "Is she angry with us?"

Harry lifted his face and gazed at her, looking both weary and sad. He shrugged. "Mostly me, I think."

"Poor, brave Harry, taking on Mum all by himself," Ginny sympathized.

"And poor cowardly us, letting him do it alone," Ron said with a disgusted grimace. "Sorry, mate."

"No worries. It had to be done."

Just then, they heard something dropping heavily from step to step. *THUD! THUD! THUD! THUD!* Harry pushed Ginny aside and jumped up. "What the bloody hell?"

The four friends moved to the hallway, where they saw Molly determinedly dragging two trunks down the stairs and toward the front door, a frantic Dobby trying desperately to help her. She yanked them out of his grasp every time he managed to get a grip on one of them.

"Mum? Where are you going?" Ron said, moving toward her.

"We're going to stay with the twins. At least they don't have house-elves or fiancés for me to upset!" she snapped, reaching for the doorknob. "Come on, Ginny."

“*What?*” Ginny said, her eyes wide with shock. She noticed the second trunk was hers. “I’m not going anywhere!”

“Yes, you are,” Molly said with absolute certainty. “Hermione, dear, your trunk is still at the top of the stairs. Would you be a love and bring it down?”

“Uh. . .,” Hermione mumbled, looking from Molly to Ron and then Harry.

Ron glared down at his mother. “She’s staying here.”

“She most certainly is not!” Molly snapped. “She’s our responsibility until she marries and—”

“And she’s marrying me. And she’s an adult. She can live wherever she wants to,” Ron said. He’d rarely defied his mother to her face, but it just wasn’t right to take the girls away, and he wasn’t going to stand for it.

Molly stared at him, her eyes flashing furiously, and then turned the same livid glower on Hermione. “So that’s how it is.”

“Yes,” Ron said, putting a protective arm around his fiancé.

Hermione stood silent, watching Ron in awe. He was magnificent. He seemed to be twice as tall, twice as broad-shouldered, his eyes a flinty blue, his face like marble, hard and cold.

Molly’s eyes flashed with mounting rage. “You—”

Ron’s voice was adamant. “Hermione and I are both adults, Mum. We can live wherever we want, married or not. You know that.”

“FINE!” She grabbed her daughter’s wrist. “Come on, Ginny.”

“NO!” Ginny said, pulling against her mother’s grip. “Let go of me!”

“You are my daughter and you will do as you’re told!” Molly said, glaring at the young woman.

“I’m old enough to marry with my parents’ permission,” Ginny said, glaring right back at her mother. “Dad will sign for me, won’t you, Dad?”

Arthur was coming down the stairs, his face haggard and weary, carrying his suitcase in his hand. “Yes, I’ll sign for you.”

“WHAT? Arthur Weasley, what—” Molly began.

“You and I both know Harry and Ginny are made for each other,” Arthur said, his voice quiet and sad. “They deserve whatever happiness they can find. I don’t want them to marry before she finishes school, but if you try to separate them, Molly, I will sign for them to marry this summer.”

Ginny smiled at her father, tears in her eyes. "Thanks, Dad."

"You're a grown woman in everything but years, dear girl. You're a decorated war hero, you've nursed Harry through so many recoveries that I've lost count, and you show a wisdom and maturity for which I have the utmost respect. I would prefer you wait and marry after you finish Hogwarts, but if things don't work out that way, so be it. I'm sure you and Harry will be fine either way."

"We can live in my quarters at Hogwarts instead of here," Harry told Arthur, "to make sure she finishes. If we marry this summer, that is." He glanced uncertainly at Ginny, not wanting to force any kind of decision under the circumstances.

Ginny gazed at him in shock. Harry had been as adamant as her parents about them not marrying this summer, yet here he was, finding ways to make it work.

Molly stared at her husband, her mouth hanging open in disbelief. She closed it with a snap, yanked the door open and went outside. Without another word, she Vanished her trunk, then Disapparated.

Everyone was silent for a few minutes after Dobby quietly closed the door behind Molly.

Ginny turned to her father. "Are you all right?"

Arthur gave her a tired smile. "I'll be fine, dear girl. We just need more time to heal. Perhaps the twins won't mind too much, but I won't hold my breath about it."

Ron snorted. "I can't see the twins being too chuffed to have Mum ordering them around."

"Yes, well, she'll be better eventually. We just have to be patient. You lot behave yourselves. Take care of each other."

"You know we will," Ginny said, standing on tiptoe to kiss her tall father's cheek. "Love you, Dad."

"I love you too, all of you," Arthur said, hugging his daughter and glancing around at the others standing uncomfortably around him. He noticed Harry's expression. The younger man looked ill. "Harry, this isn't your fault."

"If I hadn't—"

"Molly is falling apart and needs time to heal, as do we all. You were right about that. The twins have been away from home long enough that she may leave them alone. She still wants to mother you lot too much. I'm sorry. Thanks for everything, Harry."

"I wish—" Harry began.

"Don't we all," Arthur agreed. "We'll see you soon."

"You're welcome to come back when she's better," Harry said. "Both of you."

Arthur spanned Harry's broad shoulders in a one-armed hug. "You are such a fine young man, Harry. Molly and I are both so proud of you, and so appreciative of all you've done for us. We do love you, never doubt that for a minute. Molly hasn't stopped loving you, she's just hurt. She'll get over it eventually."

"I hope we all live long enough to see that day," Ron said darkly.

"Me too," Arthur agreed, patting his son on the shoulder. "I'd best be off." He stepped outside, sent his suitcase ahead of him, then Disapparated.

"What have we done?" Ginny said, looking around her apprehensively. "Offended your mother beyond belief, I think," Harry said, looking glum. "Dobby, do you have a snack for us?"

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir, Dobby does!" Dobby said, relieved to be doing something properly again. "Will you eat in the dining room or the kitchen, sir?"

"The kitchen."

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Late that evening, their snack consumed, Quidditch plays learned and Auror School homework nearly finished, Harry sat back and stretched. He laughed and tapped Ron on the head. Ron was sprawled across his desk, snoring. "Wake up, mate!" Harry said, far more cheerily than he should have, given how tired he was.

"What?" Ron said, lifting his head and staring at Harry with bleary disbelief. "What's going on?"

"I've finished! Have you?"

"Nearly there, but my eyes went crossed, I'm so tired. I was just resting them."

"You were snoring. That's a bit more than resting your eyes," Harry teased.

"Why the bloody hell are you so damned cheerful?" Ron grumbled as he knuckled his eyes and yawned.

"We have the house to ourselves!" Harry said, shoving Ron's shoulder playfully. "Remember?"

"Yeah, Mum's not going to forgive us for quite a while," Ron said, shaking his head.

"Ron," Harry said patiently. "The. House. Is. Empty. Except for us and the elves, and the elves won't bother us!" he reminded him. "Girls? Remember? We each have a fiancé who's been neglected the last month, thanks to your mum."

"The house is empty! Wicked!" Ron said, finally waking up and cottoning on.

Both young men shoved their chairs back from the library table where they'd been working and went to find the girls, who were curled up in cosy chairs in the living room. Hermione was reading, while Ginny was servicing her broom.

"There's my woman, cleaning her broom like a good flyer," Harry said approvingly.

"You're finished?" Ginny said.

"Yeah. Leave that, I have plans for you!" he said, bending over and lifting her into his arms.

"Oh really? What kind of plans?" she said, her smile so tender it nearly broke Harry's heart.

"You'll see," he said, heading up the stairs without even saying goodnight to the other couple.

Meanwhile, Ron had walked up behind Hermione, taken her book away and carefully marked her place, then set it aside. "Hello, beautiful," he murmured as he bent over and gave her a tender, upside-down kiss.

"Hello yourself," she said when he broke the kiss. "You're in a good mood."

"I'll be in an even better mood soon," he said, taking her hand and leading her up the stairs. He wished he could carry her, but his bad leg wouldn't allow such frivolity anymore.

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Harry and Ginny kissed frantically as their hands busied themselves with removing each other's clothes as fast as possible. It had been far too long since they'd had enough privacy to be intimate. They fell onto the bed and moved to the centre, laughing a bit as they rolled over and over each other. Harry was just getting serious about things when he heard Ginny snifle.

"What's wrong?" he said, his eyebrows drawn together in concern.

"This is why Mum didn't want me to stay," Ginny said, her voice breaking.

"We all know this," he said, trying to be patient and understanding, but failing miserably. "Why is it making you cry?"

"I don't know, I don't know," she moaned. "I'm sorry."

Harry sighed, then moved up beside her and lay on his back, stretching an arm over her head, his open shoulder an invitation she couldn't resist. As she snuggled into his arms, he said, "Is this a crying day? Is that why you and your mum and Hermione aren't getting along?"

"No . . . maybe . . . I don't know," she sniffled. "I don't know, I don't know."

He patted her shoulder and smoothed her hair. "It's OK, love. It will all work out eventually. We're a family, all of us. We'll sort it out."

She looked up at him through tear-filled eyes. "Promise?"

"Promise."

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"I'm sorry," Hermione said as she soaked her pillow with tears. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"It's a crying day, right?" Ron said, hoping it would be over soon.

"No, I don't think so," Hermione said, wiping her tears away and settling in his arms. "Honestly? I think we're all just getting past the shock of everything that's happened and are dealing with it however we can. And it's just too much to manage when all of us are hurting so much."

"Yeah, that sounds about right." Ron sighed. Would they ever get past the huge holes in their hearts left by all the people they'd lost?

"I hope we haven't hurt your mum's feelings too much."

"She'll get over it if she wants to see her grandchildren," he teased, making her laugh.

"Were you planning on starting those any time soon?"

"No, not really. But it's a good weapon to use when dealing with Mum, don't you think?"

"Yes, I think it's probably the best way to get through to her if she proves to be a typically stubborn Weasley," Hermione said, smiling as she waited for the explosion.

"I'm not stubborn!"

Hermione smirked a bit, glad she knew him so well. "Not right now, you're not," she said, stretching up to kiss his lips. She sniffled, trying to avoid crying again. Her heart ached for her parents. She wanted to talk with them about the problems with Molly, about the university classes she was choosing, about her and Ron's wedding plans – but they weren't there. For some reason, her longing for them had come to a head today, and everything Molly Weasley had said or done had made her miss them even more.

"I know you're exhausted," she said when her tears were nearly dry. "Let's just get some sleep, OK? It will be so nice to spend the whole night in your arms. I've missed you so much."

"Mmm, me too," he said, kissing her tenderly. "Night, 'Mione."

“Night, love.”

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“Dobby, is the picnic packed?” Harry said early the next morning. The girls were showering and Ron was still asleep. Harry had hurried downstairs to start things rolling by conspiring with his elves.

“Almost finished, sir. Dobby hopes Harry Potter sir’s friends will enjoy it!”

“I hope they do too. At least we’ll have a good lunch. I think they’ll enjoy what I have in mind, though.”

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Harry outlined his idea over breakfast.

“Where do you plan to do this?” Ron said, his interest piqued.

“I don’t know. We need a big open area where we won’t be disturbed. Do you have any ideas?”

“Well, there’s this huge meadow and woods just outside of Lesser Ottery,” Ron replied. “That’s the village a few miles south of Ottery St. Catchpole.”

The two couples worked out the details with excitement. Harry’s idea sounded like great fun!

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“This is brilliant, Ron! Thanks for thinking of it!” Harry enthused as he glanced around the landscape. Thick hedges surrounded three sides of a huge rolling heath, with summer-long grass waving in the wind and scrub bushes dotting the meadow. The fourth side faced a low stone wall, beyond which were the pastures of a farm, where lambs gambolled around their mothers. All the farm buildings were at a distance, so they should have the meadow to themselves.

Harry secured their picnic lunch in a tree with wards around it to protect it from any wildlife that might like to sample their food, then turned and grinned at his friends. “Ready?”

“Yeah!” Ginny cried in delight. “I can’t wait!”

“I wonder how my leg will do?” Ron said suddenly, glancing down at the offending limb in frustration.

“I won’t leave you behind if it slows you down,” Hermione promised.

"I've seen dogs run three-legged before," Harry said with confidence. "You'll be fine."

Ron swallowed hard, then put on a brave face. "Let's do it!" He pulled out his wand and turned to Hermione. "Do you want to be a poodle again?"

"Why don't you try being a collie?" Ginny suggested. "Then you'll match. That will be cute!"

"That sounds good," Hermione said, wishing she didn't have to depend on the others to transform her. She had gone back to trying to do the Animagus transformation herself, but still had no luck with it beyond a paw.

Soon two beautiful sable collies, a huge black wolf and a dainty red fox were sprinting across the meadow, tongues lolling in happy doggy laughs, Merlin soaring overhead for a while before settling in a tree for a nap. The larger collie ran three-legged, his bad leg simply held up off the ground. He didn't lose any speed at all once he worked out how to run that way. He barked with joy at his newfound freedom of movement.

After running long enough to need a rest, the four of them flopped down, tongues lolling out as they enjoyed the warm sunshine.

The female collie deliberately bumped into the male, then nipped at him playfully. The two were soon tussling in a mock battle, rolling over and over down a small hill and landing in a small swale at the bottom.

The wolf and the fox watched the collies for a while, decided they were all right, then went back to running, enjoying the feeling of the wind in their fur. They circled the meadow, ran a bit into the woods, then raced back across the field, stopping when they saw the two collies sitting back on top of the hill and staring at something. The wolf and fox moved closer to see what had caught the collies' interest. The female collie was whining piteously. She had a huge thorn in her paw, which the male was trying to pull out with his teeth.

The wolf was considering changing back into a wizard so he could heal the injury when the fox took off after a rabbit. The wolf turned and watched the fox run, enjoying the play of sunlight on her russet fur. The rabbit froze in place and the fox leaped playfully in the air, intending to pounce on the rabbit, when there was a resounding BOOM.

Changing instantly into himself, Harry screamed, "*GINNY!*" and ran toward her, holding a hand up toward the Muggle who stood a distance away staring at him, a startled expression on his face as he lowered his rifle from his shoulder.

"Damned fox won't get any more of my chickens," the old man grumbled, wondering where this wild-eyed young man had come from just before Harry's spell hit him and he was frozen in place, his eyes the only part of him that could move. Harry's spell was followed by a furious phoenix. Merlin knocked the man to the ground and picked up the rifle, carrying it far away before dropping it into a deep hole, where it disappeared.

"How is she?" Ron cried, limping along behind Harry. Hermione, still in dog form, ran beside him. They stopped and dropped to the ground next to Harry, who had changed Ginny back into herself and ripped her blouse open. She was bleeding profusely from an ugly hole in her shoulder. Her eyes were closed, her breathing quick and shallow.

"She's alive, but only just," Harry said in a choked voice as he turned her over to look for an exit wound. "It went all the way through. There's no bullet inside. She's losing so much blood!" he muttered, then changed into a phoenix and began crying over her wound.

The female collie bumped into Ron and he glanced at her. "Oh, sorry," he said, then reversed the spell so Hermione knelt next to him, squeezing her hand where it had been punctured by the big thorn.

"You OK?" Ron asked, seeing her gesture.

"Yeah," she said, sniffing as tears ran down her face. "I can't believe this. Is she going to be all right?"

"Dunno." Ron gulped hard. He couldn't lose his sister, not now! Not after everything they'd been through!

The phoenix looked up at Ron, who gently turned Ginny over so Harry could treat the other side of her wound. Soon both holes were closed, but there was so much blood on the ground, so very much. It was awful. Harry changed back into himself and passed his hands over her wounds, trying to heal them more, but his concentration just wasn't there.

As Harry worked, Ron stripped off his shirt and ripped it into strips. He wrapped the strips around his sister, tying them together to bind her arm tightly to her body so there would be no undue pressure on her shoulder. "Maybe that will help," he muttered as he finished.

"Thanks," Harry said. "I'm taking her to St. Mungo's. Meet us there." he said, then started to change back into a phoenix. He stopped when he heard Merlin call to him.

The magnificent bird returned from disposing of the Muggle and his rifle. As he neared the ground, Merlin noticed Hermione holding her hand. He hovered over her just long enough to drip one tear into her palm, then flew to Harry, who had lifted Ginny in his arms. Merlin hooked his talons in Harry's belt, lifted off and the three of them flashed out of sight.

"Let's go," Ron said, but Hermione put a hand on his arm.

"What about the Muggle?"

"What spell did Harry use?"

"I don't know," she said, glancing at the spot where she'd last seen the man. "Where is he?"

"Merlin did something over there," Ron replied. "Maybe he knocked him over so he won't be so noticeable to other people."

"Maybe so. The Ministry will need to see to him, though. He's seen Harry as a phoenix and me as a collie, and probably other things he shouldn't have. They need to change his memory."

"We need to tell Mum and Dad that Ginny's hurt," Ron countered.

"Who should we tell about the Muggle? I'll contact them while you let your parents know about Ginny," Hermione offered.

"I don't know. I can't think!" Ron cried, still in shock over the sudden horrible turn to their pleasant day. He banged his fists against his temples, trying to force coherent thought into his head. Finally, he glanced at her and said, "Mr. O'Connell at the Auror School. He'll know what to do."

"Got it," Hermione said. She glanced at his pale body gleaming in the sunlight. If he wasn't covered soon, he'd burn. She conjured a shirt for him, but he barely noticed that he was clothed again.

Ron's mind was fully involved in what he was about to do. "I don't know how to tell Mum and Dad."

"Just tell your dad. Let him deal with your mum."

"Yeah. That's what I'll do. Thanks." As his hands fell away from his head, his hand brushed the new shirt. "Oh. Nice shirt." He gave her a sad smile and then forced himself to compose his message to his parents.

* * * * *

Harry sat holding Ginny's hand, refusing to move as the healers worked on her. Marcus Pomfrey was in charge, which was a comfort to Harry.

"How is she?" he asked for what seemed like the hundredth time.

"Patience, Harry," Marcus said as he concentrated on his crystal. Finally he straightened up. "The crystal shows me that there's some debris inside the wound. We're going to have to re-open the wound to clean it, and to make certain the blood vessels are repaired properly. You didn't do a complete healing, did you?"

Harry looked at his friend, barely able to contain his distress. "No, I just poured phoenix tears into it on both sides to stop the bleeding and try to heal it, but I was hurrying so . . . Did I do something wrong?"

"No, you did very well. I just need to get a specialist in here to work on her."

A short time later, another healer came in, followed closely by Ron and Hermione.

"How is she?" Ron asked. A nurse tried to keep him from the bedside, but he shoved her away angrily.

"Sorry," Hermione murmured, helping the woman to her feet. "He didn't mean to—"

"Never mind. We should be used to you lot by now," the woman grumbled.

"Harry? What's going on?" Ron asked, seeing a strange healer bent over his sister.

"She needed a specialist. The bullet left some debris behind or something, I don't know. I didn't know about that or I might have fixed it," Harry replied, shaking his head in misery, "but I was trying to stop the bleeding. There was so much blood. . . ."

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "You did fine, mate. Nobody's blaming you for anything."

Harry raised his eyes and gazed into Ron's for a long moment. "Thanks."

“No problem,” Ron said, his voice gruff. He knew his best mate well enough to know that Harry would blame himself, and would expect Ginny’s family to blame him as well. Best to get that worry off of his friend’s chest as soon as possible. Besides, Ginny would never forgive Ron if he let Harry think such a thing for long.

Molly and Arthur stormed into the room.

“Where’s my baby? What happened?” Molly cried, pushing through the healers and nurses crowded around the bed to see her daughter’s still form. Ginny’s face was ghastly white against the rich colour of her hair. Molly gasped, her knees buckling. Arthur caught her before she fell, leading her to a chair away from the bed so she could calm herself.

“She’s getting the best of care,” Marcus called to them. “Harry closed up her wound as soon as possible and probably saved her life. We need to clean a few things up inside the wound. That’s what we’re doing now. She’s lost a lot of blood, and the Blood Restoring Potion is taking some time to work as a result. That’s why she’s so pale.”

Fred, George and Charlie entered just as Marcus was finishing this explanation.

“She can have my blood,” all three of them said at once.

“And mine,” Ron, Molly and Arthur added.

“As I told Harry when he offered,” Marcus said, glancing around at the various Weasleys, “you lot were badly injured not that long ago. Taking your blood isn’t a good idea.”

“I wasn’t injured,” Fred said, his voice determined. “Take mine!”

“And mine!” Molly insisted.

“And mine,” Hermione added.

“I wasn’t that badly injured!” George cried, infuriated to not be allowed to help his baby sister. Charlie and Ron stood by looking glum, knowing their offers would be refused.

Marcus smiled at the as-usual rowdy Weasleys. “Nurse, take Fred, Molly and Hermione and get their donations, will you? Thanks.” He glanced at the twins again. “And make sure the twins don’t pull some kind of switch on you, saying you forgot to take Fred’s, and it’s actually George you’re sticking,” he added with a small smile. He was quite fond of the whole Weasley clan.

Hermione quickly returned, having been the first to give blood. She had barely settled in next to Ron when Marcus nearly bumped into them. He looked around the room “I’m sorry, but there are simply too many people in here. Some of you are going to have to leave.”

George and Charlie looked at each other, then at their dad. “We’ll be in the waiting room, Dad,” Charlie said.

“Thanks,” Arthur said.

"It's still too crowded in here," Marcus said, glancing at Ron and Hermione, who took the hint and started for the door. Ron gave Harry's shoulder a squeeze, and Hermione bent and kissed him on the cheek just before they left.

"I won't leave," Harry said when Marcus looked down at him.

"And I won't ask you to, Harry. I just wondered how you were holding up."

"I'll be OK when she is," he murmured. "How's she doing?"

Marcus glanced across the room to Arthur, whose grief-stricken eyes were locked on his daughter. He didn't seem to be aware of much that was going on in the room at the moment other than the unnatural stillness of his little girl, and the blood on the healers' hands.

Marcus sighed, then nodded at the specialist, who said, "I'll be honest with you, Mr. Potter. It's touch and go for now. We need to treat her for possible infection because you closed up the wound without cleaning out the debris." His eyes locked with Harry's. "You were working fast, trying to stop the bleeding, which was the most important thing to do at the time. You did a good job, the very best you could. Don't blame yourself. Marcus said to be honest with you, and that's what I'm doing. Are you OK with that?"

Harry's face had lost all colour. He nodded, unable to speak, then bowed his head over Ginny's hand, holding her small, cold fingers against his cheek. He watched her face for any sign of her awakening. He started when he felt a big, warm hand clasping his shoulder. He glanced up to see Remus standing behind him.

"I didn't . . . when did you get here?" Harry said as he stared at his godfather.

"Just now. Ron had the twins contact me after he reached them. Tonks will be here in a moment. She's talking with Molly. We won't stay long, but I wanted to see how you were doing, Harry."

Harry swallowed hard, tears pricking his eyes, his voice breaking as he said, "It's bad, Remus."

"I'm so sorry." He wrapped his arms around the young man and held him close, while Harry stayed in his seat next to Ginny.

Harry sighed and relaxed in his godfather's embrace, soaking up the comfort Remus was offering. He felt a smaller hand rubbing his back, stroking his hair, and heard Tonks's voice murmuring soothing words in his ear. How had he ever survived without these two loving people in his life? He lifted his tear-streaked face and tried to smile at Tonks. "That feels good. Thanks for coming."

"You know I never miss a chance to get my hands on you, handsome," Tonks teased.

Harry smiled slightly, just the reward Tonks had aimed for. "You're silly."

"And that's one of the many reasons you love me," she assured him.

"Yeah, it is," he agreed, leaning his head against her encircling arm for a moment. He glanced up at her and tried to smile. "How's Junior?"

“His or her name will not be ‘Junior,’” Tonks replied, acting affronted. “Nor will it be ‘Nymphadora’! And he or she is just fine, thank you very much.” Tonks turned to watch the healers still working on Ginny. Nurses came and went with alarming frequency, and Molly had returned and was now sitting with Arthur’s comforting arms around her.

“Between the transfusions and the Blood Restoring Potion, she’s doing a bit better,” Marcus said in answer to the unspoken question in everyone’s eyes.

“We’ll be in the waiting room with the others if you need us, Harry,” Remus said, running a gentle hand over his godson’s hair. “Can we bring you anything? Coffee? Tea?”

“No, I’m fine, thanks. I’m glad you’re here,” Harry murmured.

“She’ll be fine, ducks, I’m sure of it,” Tonks said, leaning down to kiss his cheek. “Your grandfather sends his love. He’s tied up in a Ministry meeting, but he’ll be here as soon as he can. We’ll check on you later, all right?”

“K.”

* * * * *

Many hours later, Harry stretched, wondering how Ginny had managed all the times she’d sat by his bedside. He was heartsick, weary, and every part of his body ached from sitting too stiffly in one position or another.

“Are you all right?” Molly asked with genuine concern.

Harry looked up at her. She’d stayed quiet, leaving him alone to deal with his emotions, but hadn’t acted as distant as he’d thought she would after their recent confrontation. He wondered what their relationship was like now, resisting the temptation to do Legilimency on her to find out. He rolled his shoulders and neck again. “Bit stiff.”

“Harry, I need to talk to you. I would’ve said this sooner, but you were so wrapped up in worrying about Ginny, I didn’t think you would hear me.”

“You’re right.”

“I’m . . . I’m sorry I was so awful to all of you. Losing the boys . . . well, you know. And then to have this happen to Ginny!” She shook her head, wiping away errant tears. Arthur sat back in his chair, watching the conversation quietly. The three of them were the only ones in the room at the moment besides Ginny.

Harry gazed at her sadly, misery weighing him down. “I’m sorry. It seemed like a fun day – play in the meadow and have a picnic. I never thought anyone would be out there shooting at foxes.” He dropped his gaze to Ginny’s pale face again.

“It was *not* your fault, Harry dear, don’t you even think about it,” Molly assured him. Arthur leaned forward and nodded when he saw Harry glance up at Molly’s comment.

“Nobody blames you,” Arthur assured him. “O’Connell told me that when they modified that Muggle’s memory, they made certain he wouldn’t shoot any foxes, wolves or collies ever again. Merlin showed them where the rifle was hidden, and they Vanished it. I think you’ll be safe playing in that

meadow from now on.”

Harry nodded. “Thanks.”

“I can’t believe it took one of my children being hurt for me to see how wrong I was, Harry,” Molly said, sobbing now. “I shouldn’t be so stubborn, so stupid—”

“You’re not stupid, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry assured her, “but stubborn does seem to run in your family.” He smiled a bit as he said it.

“So we’re . . . all . . . getting along . . . again?” Ginny said, surprising all of them.

“Hi, baby!” Harry cried, leaning over and kissing her forehead. “How do you feel?”

“You missed,” she murmured as she tried to lift her lips to his.

“I didn’t miss,” he said, then kissed her softly on the lips. “I’m glad you’re awake! I missed you!”

“I’ll let the healers know she’s awake,” Arthur said. “I’m so happy you’re better,” he said, kissing his daughter’s hand before leaving.

“Yes, dear, we’re getting along again,” Molly said, smiling through her tears. “I will just have to accept the fact that all of my children are adults now. It will take some adjustments on my part.”

Ginny gave her mother a weary smile. “Thanks.”

* * * * *

Hours later, Ginny was much stronger. The transfusions and other treatments the healers had used had worked their magic. She woke up from a long nap to see Harry and her parents still maintaining their vigil, but asleep. Harry was seated in a chair shoved a bit away from the bed due to his height. His head and shoulders lay sprawled across her bed, his hand holding hers but open and relaxed now, his head cradled in his other arm. Her heart swelled with love as she studied his sleeping face. Lines of fatigue and worry etched his face, making him look far older than his years. She smiled slightly. *That’s how he’ll look when we’ve been married twenty years, maybe. Still handsome, still my Harry.* She slid her hand out of his and smoothed his hair away from his eyes. Her movement woke him.

He sat up and blinked hard, then shoved his glasses up and knuckled his eyes. He smiled at her, the lines of worry fading rapidly as he saw her return his smile “How are you?”

“I feel much better,” she said, lacing her fingers through his. “You must be stiff, folding that long body of yours up like that.”

He sat up and stretched the kinks out of his back. “I’m fine,” he said, smirking when his comment made her grin.

“You *are* fine,” she said, giving the words an entirely different meaning with the love in her gaze. She nodded toward her parents. “Getting along with them OK now?”

“Yeah.”

“Good.”

“Ginny! You’re awake!” her mother said, stirred from her doze by the sound of their quiet conversation. Arthur sat up straighter and smiled at his daughter.

“Hi,” Ginny replied, smiling as both of her parents kissed her.

“I want you to know, things will be different now,” Molly said, smoothing her daughter’s hair. “I didn’t mean to be so overbearing, or to treat you like children. I suppose I was holding on to you and Ron and Hermione too hard because I wanted you to stay children just a while longer.”

“So you’re coming back to Harry’s home?” Ginny said warily. She wasn’t certain if she was ready to deal with her mother’s volatile moods yet.

“Oh, no, not right away. I think it will be fun to torment the twins for a while,” Molly said, a hint of humour in her eyes.

Ginny smiled, but didn’t say anything. Her mother hadn’t said or done anything playful in months. It was good to see her acting more like her old self.

“And if you still want help planning your wedding, just let me know. That’s a pleasure I don’t want to miss. If you’re going to have it this summer, we’ll have to rush things a bit, but—“

“If you will really treat us like adults, we can wait and get married next year,” Ginny said, surprising them all. She took Harry’s hand and smiled at him. “My future husband wants a big church wedding, and that will take some time to arrange. I don’t want to deprive him of anything.”

Harry grinned. “Are you sure?”

“If things are actually worked out so we can all get along, yes. Hermione and Ron will be marrying soon. I don’t want our weddings to be that close together anyway. They should be individual and special,” she replied.

“That’s what I want too,” Harry said, his eyes locked with hers.

Ginny yawned, breaking the spell and making Harry laugh. “Sorry,” she said with a slight giggle.

“You rest. I want you healthy and out of here as soon as possible!” Harry replied.

“Me, too.” She yawned again. “I enjoyed our day, Harry – at least until I got shot.”

“I did too. We’ll have to do it again soon, but on secured property so we don’t get hurt!” he replied. “I’ll start putting up wards around my Godric’s Hollow property so we can play there. I don’t want my favourite fox injured again!”

“Sounds good to me,” she agreed.