

## Along the way Confessions

Along the Way – Chapter 1

Confessions

*In the way of a forward: I solemnly said that I wasn't going to write any fan-fiction set after HBP. Then the plot-bunny that became Maskirova stood up and started running through the wrinkles of my brain. Then I said that I wasn't going to write a search for the Horcrux story, when a couple of ideas that built on Maskirova came to me and wouldn't go away. Next time I say that I'm not going to write something – just ignore me – it'll change within a day or so. Now, on to this story: you've read Half-Blood Prince, right? Well after that, Harry has his last wretched summer at the Dursleys, then there's the much-looked-forward-to wedding of Bill Weasley and Fleur Delacour, in which Harry perfects his "lets dump Ginny to keep her safe" plan by perpetuating a hoax on a wizarding world all too eager to snap up celebrity news. This hoax was covered in the story Maskirova. After Harry's birthday, the trio go searching for the bits of Voldemort's soul that he stashed here and there for safekeeping. Some of the time they used Grimmauld Place as their base of operations, and other times they used a magical tent similar to the borrowed tent used by the Weasleys for the Quidditch World Cup. This tent has a few modifications; however, insofar as Molly made certain that Hermione's room in the tent had the same boy-repelling charms that grace the stairway leading to the girl's dormitory in Gryffindor Tower. In August, they found two of the dark treasures, the first hidden under their noses at Grimmauld Place, and the second, well, we won't say where they found that one, but it was a bit of a thrill to have survived the experience more or less intact.*

It was amazing, really, what difference an hour made. An hour ago they'd been running pell-mell from Inferi, hoping against hope that they'd guessed right when they snatched the package and ran. Now they were settling down into what he called their holiday routine: Harry was inside the tent, bent over the small writing desk in their shared bedroom, writing another letter to Ginny; Hermione was leaning up against a tree, fitting in some light reading in the last hour of good daylight; Ron, fresh from his shower, was trying to distract Hermione. He was getting very good at that, now that he knew what would make her purr.

"Budge up, will you? I want to sit behind you," he said, prodding her bum with his shoe.

Hermione looked up at him, raising one eyebrow before she scooted forward, letting him slip behind her. He swung one lanky leg behind her back and then sank to the ground, one leg on either side of her. She leaned back into him, turning a page in her book. He slid his hands carefully across her stomach, pulling her just a little bit closer to him. Looking over her shoulder he saw the letters on the page shimmer and wiggle.

"What sort of book is that?" he whispered, smiling as she shivered. Breathing on the back of her neck was good for that.

"It's Norse," she answered, frowning at the book.

"You don't speak Norse," he said, a puzzled expression on his face.

"That's why I'm using a translation charm," she answered.

"Is that what's making the letters jump around?"

"Yes, now quiet down, I'm almost through," she said.

Ron leaned his head back, closing his eyes. The sun was shining warmly. The woman he loved was more or less right where he wanted her, and they'd finished another one of their crazy missions with all of their limbs intact.

He felt her stir a few minutes later as she closed the book.

"You were brilliant today," she said warmly.

"Hmm?" he replied sleepily.

"Really," she said, "it went like clockwork."

"I was scared," Ron whispered.

"I'm always scared," she replied.

"Why are we doing this?" he asked rhetorically.

"Because he needs us," she said, leaning her head backwards until her cheek brushed up against his. He moved his hands up from her stomach, stroking with his thumbs. She made a throaty sound before she moved his hands back to her stomach. "Not now," she said half-heartedly.

"Where's Harry?"

"He's back in the tent, writing a brief report to Lupin and a long steamy letter to my sister," he replied.

"How do you know it's steamy?"

"I've seen the look on his face when he stuffs the pages away when I come into the room."

"I think it's sweet," Hermione said. "Ginny read one to me the last time we were at Hogwarts; they *are* a bit steamy."

"So why aren't you writing letters?" Ron asked.

"I *do* write letters – every week I send a note to Mum and Dad," she answered.

"That's not what I meant," Ron said sullenly.

"Speak plainly, Ron," Hermione said, putting her book down on top of her ever-present satchel.

"You haven't been writing *Vic* -tor," he said.

"So?"

"You've been writing him for ages."

"Well, I'm *not* writing him *this* summer," Hermione huffed. "It's quite simple really. He's off playing Quidditch with the Bulgarian team again, I haven't an owl, and Victor warned me that his mail is being watched."

"So you *would* be writing him if you could?" Ron asked.

"Maybe," Hermione said playfully.

"Wrong answer," Ron growled.

"Wrong attitude," Hermione answered. "Ronald, the only boy I've kissed more than once has his arms around me right now," Hermione said, placing her hands on top of his.

"So you only kissed him once?" he asked.

"On the lips? Yes," she answered.

"I guess cheeking doesn't count," he grumbled.

"Only if it leads to something else," she said, wiggling into him.

"So when did he kiss you?"

"Yule ball," she answered quietly. "I'd spent the night in the most fabulous gown I'd ever worn in my life, pressed up against a handsome, attentive gentleman. I think I was more than a little under the influence of the circumstances. He wasn't my first choice for the Yule Ball you know."

"No?"

"I was praying that you'd ask me. I was so insecure – I knew that I liked you as more than just a friend, but I wasn't sure if you even knew that I was a girl. When they announced the Yule Ball my first hope was that you'd ask me out – as a date," she said.

"And your second hope?"

"That Harry would ask me to go as a friend," she answered.

"As a friend? What's the difference?"

"If you go as friends, you know that nothing's going to come of it – think of taking Ginny to the ball," Hermione said, gesturing with her hands.

"But she's my sister!"

"That's the point – at the end of the night she might give you a kiss on the cheek if you've been a dear," she explained.

"So what's the point?"

"The point is that you still get to go to the ball, even though you don't have a real date," she said.

"Like Neville?"

"Exactly," Hermione said.

"Who else?" Ron asked, leaning back against the tree.

"Pah! That pig McClaggen, tried to push me under the mistletoe at the Christmas Slug party," Hermione said with disdain.

"I can't imagine you putting up with that for one instant," Ron said with a smirk.

"No, I was pretty severe in my response," she said with an angry grin. "I was predisposed to be cross that night."

"Why were you cross?" Ron asked.

"I was supposed to have a different date for that party, remember?"

"Oh, right," he said. He began rubbing his fingertips in a circle on her belly. "So, who came after McClaggen?"

"Oh, that was just a fling," Hermione answered teasingly.

"Names, Miss Granger," Ron said with mock seriousness.

"I'm not sure that I remember his name – I do think that he was the Keeper for the house Quidditch team – I distinctly remember something about him holding the Quidditch Cup," she said, one finger on her chin as she looked as if she were concentrating hard.

"And after that?" he asked playfully.

She didn't answer. Ron's heart skipped a beat. "Hermione?"

"Harry," she answered in a small voice.

"Harry? You snogged Harry?" he asked incredulously.

"I most certainly did not snog Harry!" she answered emphatically.

"But you kissed him?" he asked warily.

"Yes."

"What's the difference?"

Hermione was silent for a moment. He could see the colour rising in her cheeks. She mumbled something inaudible.

"I didn't catch that," he said.

"I said 'no tongues.'"

"Why were you kissing Harry, no ignore that, *when* were you kissing Harry?"

"Early in July, before the wedding, when I was teaching him to Tango," she answered.

"I didn't know you knew how to Tango," he said with a note of admiration. "Wait a minute, we were dating then," he complained.

"There's a lot of things you don't know about me," she said, scooting back into him and pulling his arms around her again.

"Evidently," he said sarcastically. "So, why no tongues with Harry? Does he drool?"

"You'll have to ask your sister, I haven't a clue whether he drools or not."

"What about the first part of the question?"

Hermione muttered something inaudible again as she pushed his hands aside and stood up, crossing her arms in front of her as she walked away.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear that either," he said crossly as he followed after her.

Hermione twirled to face him. In the corner of his eye he could see that she had her wand in her hand.

"Ron, I love you madly, but your jealousy is not one of your more endearing traits. I *had* to kiss Harry – it was part of the whole deception. He had to make the Wizarding world think that he'd moved on, that he wasn't in love with Ginny any more. Did you think that kiss on the dance floor was sizzling? I sure did! It was practiced, just like the Tango."

"So why didn't you kiss *him* like that?" Ron asked doggedly.

Hermione screamed in frustration. "You are so infuriating! Do I have to spell it out for you? You hadn't kissed *me* like that yet! I had wanted *you* to be my first! The only boy who has ever had his tongue in my mouth is *you*, Ron. It's always been *you* that I wanted, but you can never wrap your brain around that truth! I wanted you to be my first *everything!* I want you to be the last too," she said, her voice dying away.

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The air was crackling around them. Hermione wasn't sure if it were her magic or his, but she kept a tight grip on her wand for fear that something was going to break loose. Ron stared at her for the longest time, his face finally breaking in to a lopsided smile. "I accept," he said, reaching forward to pick her up and spin her around. He kissed her, hard, when he stopped twirling her around.

"You loon, what are you doing?" she asked.

"Accepting your offer," he said carefully, pushing her out to arm's length.

"What offer?" she asked.

"The offer to be your first and last," he said.

"Oh no you don't! I'm going to get a proper proposal and a ring and everything!" she protested.

The smile returned as he gave her a wink. "You'll get one when the time is right. I promised your dad that I'd do it right," he said.

"When were you talking with my dad?" she asked.

"Remember last week when I went into Edinburgh to pick up the ropes? They didn't have enough of the right rating, so I Apparated to a store in Leeds. While I was there, I looked your dad up at the Surgery. We had a little chat about how things were going. You don't know everything about me, either," he said smugly.

She reached up and ran her fingers through the crimson hair falling over his shirt collar, pulling his head down to hers, pulling him into a searing kiss.

"If you two are quite done, I'd like to go into town for dinner," Harry said. Hermione pulled one hand free and made a shooing motion. "On the other hand, a walk before dinner could be just the thing," he said quietly. Hermione touched her thumb to her index finger before returning her hand to the back of Ron's head. "Right, a long walk it is," Harry said to himself as he thrust his hands into his pockets. He whistled a tune raucously. Things were looking up.

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## Along the way Assay

Along the Way – Chapter 2

Assay

*People who say it's a small world never had to go looking for magical objects containing fragments of the soul of a miserable dark wizard. After finding the first two Horcruxes in the month of August, September and October go by without a lot of success. Through a combination of intuition, good luck and really superior researching skills (three guesses as to who exhibited the latter) the trio find what they hope is another Horcrux. Harry has been in contact with Remus Lupin, who has been providing support without fully knowing what the Trio are up to, but he has a fair notion given Harry's weekly reports. The Twins have supplied an item or two from time to time, stifling their native curiosity because they knew, for once, that they really didn't want to know what was going on. Lupin has served as the conduit for mail to and from Ginny, but of necessity, all the letters were very, very general. Having found three of the four outstanding Horcruxes, Lupin implores Harry to seek the advice and counsel of Professor McGonagall as to how to destroy them. Ron and Hermione go off to visit Hermione's parents, whilst Harry makes the trip to Hogwarts.*

It was amazing, really, what difference an hour made. An hour ago she was in N.E.W.T. Transfiguration class, getting reamed by her Professor.

"Miss Weasley, this particular transfiguration is already hazardous to life and limb; Miss Balcombe does not need the distraction provided by your running commentary!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed. "Five points from Gryffindor and detention immediately after class."

Ginny mutely nodded. *When did the old bat start channelling Snape?* she asked herself as she fought to contain the retort that came so quickly to her tongue. Sixth year was normally better than the dreadful O.W.L. year, but this was a sixth year without Dumbledore, without Hermione, without Harry; it was nothing more than an unending, wretched string of grinding chores, today followed by a most unfair detention. Maybe the twins had the right idea after all, leaving school to work for themselves, but knowing her luck she'd end up as a nanny for some colicky wizard brats in West End.

When it came time to demonstrate the transfiguration of the day, Ginny transformed her lab partner's plaited hair into hissing snakes, non-poisonous ones of course, for safety's sake. She thought she saw a hint of a smirk and the shadow of a wink on her Professor's face, but when she looked directly all she saw was her normal taciturn mien.

"Well done, five points to Gryffindor," Professor McGonagall said as Ginny reversed the transfiguration. "Class is dismissed."

The other students filed out of the classroom, leaving one old and one young witch in the room.

"Well?" Professor McGonagall asked as she looked up from her desk.

"Where am I to do detention, Ma'am?" Ginny asked politely.

"In my office, in my new office," she answered haltingly. "The password is 'ruby slipper.'"

"Yes, Ma'am," Ginny said, bobbing slightly before she threw the strap of her satchel over her shoulder. This would be her first visit to that office since the demise of the Headmaster; all the more reason to walk slowly. She was walking in the wrong direction, of course. Most students were walking towards the Great Hall, which, given the smells leaking out into the hallways, was the site of yet another wonderful dinner. She, however, was walking *away* from the Great Hall, over the protests of her rumbling stomach.

A half-hour after earning her detention, she began it by penetrating the sacred office of the Headmistress. The gargoyles guarding the stairs were wonky. The furry one was *supposed* to be on the left while the scaly one was *supposed* to be on the right, but they were vice versa tonight. She was sure of this change, having visited this office several times a month during her second year at school, receiving hours of avuncular advice and listening from the now departed Headmaster. Walking into the office, she catalogued what was different and what had stayed the same. The portraits were the same, except for one that had been removed to make way for the now slumbering portrait of Albus Dumbledore. The portrait that had been removed was an obvious choice: a headmaster from the time of Mary Queen of Scots who was loathed by the current headmistress. Not only had he attempted to ban Muggleborn students from the school, he'd also attempted to evict all the women who'd been enrolled at the time. His tenure at Hogwarts lasted one year longer than Mary's as queen.

The magical devices had changed; most of them were simply gone, with a few relocated to high shelves where they were beginning to collect a gentle layer of dust. A short cabinet clock stood behind McGonagall's old desk that she'd brought from her former office. The clock ticked out the minutes with cheery chimes on the quarter hour. She was fairly certain that she was the only one in the room, but a subliminal *something* made her uneasy. Gripping her wand firmly she called out. "Who's there?" There was no answer, but she did hear a rustle. Closing her eyes she whipped her wand to vertical and silently announced the incantation she'd practiced this summer. Several balls of light burst from the tip of her wand, shattering into shards of lightning as they rebounding from the ceiling. She opened her eyes as she heard a thump, watching Fawkes' old perch fall over. That's when she noticed the very familiar trainer and ankle appearing on the rug beneath the perch. Unlike most trainer clad feet, the leg

attached to this one disappeared a few inches above the ankle. For good measure she shot a silent *Incarcerous* around the foot, watching the ropes materialize around where she presumed the body should be before they too disappeared. Brushing her hair away from her face and straightening her robes, she walked over to the window bay, flicking the invisibility cloak away with a twitch of her wand.

If this wasn't her once and future boyfriend, it was certainly a very painstaking duplicate.

Kneeling down, she slid her fingers to the clasp of the cloak; a frog made from the same threads as the cloak, and pulled the cloak from his shoulders and face. His hair was longer than when she'd seen him last in August. She peeled off her own robes and loosened her Gryffindor tie. Considering her options carefully, she *Accio* ed his wands, plural, summoning his familiar wand along with a backup that he must have obtained during his months out in the field. She tucked the wands into the back of her waistband, hiking her skirt up before she straddled his middle. First came the *Enervate* charm. His eyes began to move beneath his paralyzed eyelids. She peeled the lids back, carefully observing the condition of his pupils before she removed the paralysis and silencing charms above his shoulders.

"Tell me something that only you know," she demanded.

"Erm, I love you?" he asked.

She smiled, glad that that was the first thing that came to mind. "You'll have to do better than that," she said.

"You have a birthmark on the small of your back in the shape of a Muggle electrical outlet," he said hesitantly.

*Blimey, when did you see that?* she thought to herself. She smiled and bent forward, scooting down his body until she was nose to nose with her captive. "I'm almost convinced," she said, kissing him.

One kiss led to another. She was so driven by her desire to reconnect that she never heard the door open.

"Miss Weasley!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed. "What is the meaning of this?"

Ginny rose slowly, pushing up from his chest, a hint of a smile on her face. "I came to your office as you requested, Professor. After I arrived I concluded that I was not alone, that there was an intruder in the office that I could not see. I exercised a defensive spell which incapacitated the intruder, after which I began to ascertain the identity of the intruder using methods endorsed by the Ministry of Magic," she said, as if reciting in class.

"And have you reached a conclusion as to the identity of your captive?" Professor McGonagall asked, noting the magical ropes still binding Harry as he lay beneath her.

"Almost," she said, leaning back down to kiss him again. "Now I'm certain," she said, pushing up with a smile on her face. "He really is Harry."

"Very good, five points to Gryffindor," Professor McGonagall said as she took her place behind her desk. "If you could be so kind as to untie your beau, I believe that he has business with both of us."

"Certainly, Ma'am," Ginny replied, standing up over Harry, taking care to straighten her skirt before she walked over to Professor McGonagall's desk. She placed Harry's wands on the desk before she sat down. Ginny stood until Harry joined them in front of McGonagall's desk, sitting down in one of the overstuffed chairs. Ginny perched on the arm of the chair, hands folded on her lap.

"You wished to see me, Harry?" Professor McGonagall asked, her face impassive.

"Yes, it's time to fill you in on what I've been doing since the summer holidays," Harry said.

"Bugger it all," Ginny said softly, moving from the arm of the chair onto Harry's lap.

"Miss Weasley, you needn't do this for my sake, I'm quite convinced that he's yours," McGonagall said with smiling eyes.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am, but the separation has been – well, it's been terrible," Ginny said.

"Hard as it may be to believe, I do remember what it is to be young, and in love, and very, very frustrated," McGonagall said warmly.

One of the portraits coughed. "Begging your pardon, Ma'am, but the Headmistress' presence is required in the Great Hall," it said.

Professor McGonagall rose from her desk. "If you will excuse me," she said, clapping her hands. "Hassit," she called.

A young, female house-elf appeared beside the Professor. "Please bring dinner to Miss Weasley and our guest. They will dine in my conference room. Dobby may assist you," she instructed.

Hassit nodded mutely and then beckoned them to follow her through a doorway leading to a room with a long table surrounded by formal chairs. The elf disappeared with a snap. Ginny looked around the room. "Dumbledore used to hold Order meetings in here," she said somberly.

"How do you know?" Harry asked.

"Fred told me. He demonstrated some of their less jocular products here – the ones with applications beyond pranking."

With a syncopated pop, Dobby and Hassit appeared, carrying a large wicker basket the size of a laundry hamper. As they placed the hamper on the ground, Dobby gave a low bow. "Welcome back, Harry Potter, sir," he said before opening the basket. With a series of elven finger snaps, the

table was set with linens and a bright floral centerpiece. Hassit placed covered dishes on the table before shrinking the basket to the size of a thimble. Grabbing the corners of her tea towel, she bobbed in a curtsy and disappeared.

“Dobby?” Ginny asked.

“Yes, Miss Wheezy?”

“Why does Hassit never speak?”

“It is because she is having no tongue, Miss. She failed to please her former Mistress,” Dobby said in a matter-of-fact fashion before he too bowed and disappeared.

“Charming,” Ginny said, wrinkling her nose. “There are times that I’m so ashamed to be a witch,” she grumbled. She began to pull a chair out before Harry moved to pull it back for her. She smiled and then sat down, allowing Harry to push the chair forward with a flourish. Harry moved his place setting so that he was beside Ginny rather than sitting across the table from her. He poured water for both of them and then began to uncover the dishes.

“Somehow, I don’t think that this is what they are serving in the Great Hall,” he said.

“And why is that?” Ginny asked.

“Spaghetti Carbonara is very difficult to make in large batches and it doesn’t hold very well. I made a batch for Hermione’s birthday, which is the only reason I recognize it. Hmm, steamed asparagus, stir-fried apples, a nice rose wine,” he said appreciatively.

“You’re right; I doubt this is what they’re serving tonight. Being Dobby’s friend has its perks,” she said, holding her wine glass out to be filled.

“Yeah, lurid socks every Christmas with the off chance of getting killed while playing Quidditch,” Harry said dryly. “So, what’s new in school?”

“Same old same old: new DADA teacher, we still have Slughorn for Potions. Thanks, by the way for letting me use the Prince’s book, it’s been most educational. Quidditch is terrible; all the teams are playing with weak, inexperienced benches. I’m playing Seeker when I’d rather be playing Chaser, you know, all the same things I’ve been saying in the letters I’ve been sending every week,” Ginny said, stopping to take a long sip of her wine. “I’ve missed you so bad that it hurts, Harry. Please tell me that you’ve bagged a bunch of his bits.”

Harry smiled. “Yeah, that’s why we’re here. Remus agrees that its time to read Professor McGonagall into the project,” he said, stopping to spear some asparagus with his fork.

“So, what did you find?” Ginny asked, slipping out of her shoes so she could run her foot across Harry’s trainer, brushing up against his ankle with her toes.

“Later,” he said. “I only want to explain this once.”

“So I’m going to be there?” she asked.

“You’re kind of essential to the next phase of the operation,” he said.

“Smooth talker, keep it up and I may let you see my birthmark again.”

“Please,” he protested, rolling his eyes. “It’s been bad enough being apart from you when I’m working with the lovebirds.”

“How *are* the lovebirds?” she asked with a smirk.

“Not nearly as subtle as they think they are,” he said with an answering smirk. “Ron’s thinking seriously about asking her to marry him.”

“Whoa! Hold up there! Is this my brother we’re talking about or some other Ron?”

“Same guy I’ve been rooming with for six years,” Harry answered.

“What brought that on?” Ginny asked.

“I think I may be responsible for a bit of it. There’s a tension between them that’s growing thicker every day. Ron asked me one night what I thought of him ‘moving things forward’ with Hermione. I made him spell out what he meant before I confessed that I understood him the first time. I told him that they were both adults, and in one way I didn’t care, but in another way, I warned him that if he did what I think he was thinking about, he better be ready to make a life-long commitment to her, because if he did that and then left her for any reason other than dying, I would consider it betraying my best friend. I told him I’d track him to the ends of the earth and kill him,” Harry said evenly.

“How’d he take that?” Ginny asked.

“Fairly well, actually; for an awkward conversation, it went fairly well. Much better than if I was asking *him* about getting into your knickers,” he said.

“Actually, I think *I’m* the one you need to have that conversation with,” she said playfully, taking care to catch his eyes as she looked over her goblet of wine.

“You know what I mean,” Harry said with exasperation.

Now, why aren't we having *that* conversation again?" Ginny asked.

"Neither can live while the other survives," Harry quoted.

"Oh, right, *that*," Ginny said.

"And before we have *that* conversation, I'll be having another conversation with your Mum and Dad," Harry said, swirling the dregs of his wine absent-mindedly.

There was a long silence as they finished their meal. It was something that Ginny had grown accustomed to – being silent with Harry. He didn't feel uncomfortable with silence and at times craved it, a commodity that was in scarce supply, living in the field with her brother and best friend.

Hassit arrived, carrying a tea service in one hand and a plate of pastries in the other. She served them, smiled shyly and disappeared. As they finished their pastries and drank their tea, Professor McGonagall arrived, carrying her own cup of tea. She smiled at them as she sat down.

"Now, Mr. Potter, if you could be so kind as to enlighten me as to what you have been doing instead of finishing your seventh year," McGonagall began.

"I know how to kill Voldemort," Harry said simply.

"And?" McGonagall asked.

"I've been putting the pieces in place. I'm almost there."

"And you need my help," she said.

"Actually, I need help from both of you. Dumbledore always said that help would be given to those who ask for it at Hogwarts," Harry said, looking to the slumbering portrait of the prior Headmaster.

Harry explained about Voldemort's use of the Horcrux in his pursuit to evade death, weaving together what he'd learned from Dumbledore's diary as well as his experiences last year and this summer.

"So it's not true Immortality that he's attained?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"No, it's more like making it very, very difficult for him to die a violent death. When the current body dies, the bit of remaining soul remains on earth because the other bits stuck in the Horcruxes anchor it to the land of the living rather than passing on like a normal soul, or fading half-way like a shade or ghost," he said.

"Shouldn't that be Horcruxes?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Hermione says one Horcrux, two Horcruxes. I'm not about to contradict her," he said.

"So what have you found thus far?" the professor asked.

"Riddle's diary was the first – it was destroyed during my second year. The second was an old family relic; a ring owned by his grandfather and the third Horcrux was a locket was linked to Slytherin. Dumbledore found the ring last year – that's when he scorched his hand. The two of us found a false locket on the coast before he died. We found the real locket hidden at Grimmauld Place, Sirius' brother beat us to the real one and put it into hiding before he was killed by Death Eaters. Next is a goblet owned by Helga Hufflepuff, we found that just before September. The latest one we found was Rowena Ravenclaw's breviary. I won't tell you where we found that one, so you won't have to answer any questions should the current owners discover that they are guarding a very authentic looking replica. We can't find any artefacts of Godric Gryffindor, which is one loose end, and we're pretty sure that Nagini is a Horcrux too – which, if I've done the math right, is six bits of Voldemort's soul, plus whatever is left in his new body," Harry said, wiping his temples in apparent fatigue.

"So, what do you need my help with?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Actually, I need Ginny's help first," Harry said, summoning his wands from Professor McGonagall's desk. He tucked one wand into his sleeve and then frowning briefly, he swished his wand in a series of arcs, creating a basket of faintly glowing lines. When the lines converged, a small strongbox appeared on the table. He fiddled with the lock for a moment before opening the box. Inside the box were several cloth covered bundles which he placed gingerly on the table. He stepped away from the assorted bundles, pulling the trunk off of the table as he did so.

"Now what?" McGonagall asked brusquely.

"Now Ginny tells us which ones are real," Harry said.

"I have to touch them, don't I?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied.

"I'll start small then," she said, her face suddenly pale. She gingerly picked at the fabric of the smallest package, taking care to not touch the item inside. With the last turn of the fabric, a heavy silvery object clattered to the table. Ginny looked at it warily and then unwrapped the other small package in a similar manner. There were now two ornate, antique lockets on the table. Ginny poked at them with her wand until they were at the end of the table, away from the other objects. Reaching out with her left hand, she lowered her hand over the locket closest to her, palm up, touching it with the back of her hand. She let out her breath. "Nothing on this one," she said, pushing it to one side. She lowered her hand to the

next locket, hissing as if burned when the back of her hand touched the locket. "It's him," she said, tucking her hand under her arm, "I'm sure of it."

"How do you know, Miss Weasley?" Professor McGonagall asked quietly.

"I could hear hissing when I touched it. I had him inside of my head for the better part of a year, I know his voice. It's him. I can't speak Parseltongue any more, but I think it's a warning," she said.

She unwrapped the remaining packages one by one, touching them gingerly. "There's a bit of him in each of these, except for the first locket," she concluded, rubbing her arms as if coming in from the cold.

Professor McGonagall conjured a thick woolen shawl that Ginny accepted gratefully. Ginny turned to Harry and burrowed into his arms. Harry looked to Professor McGonagall, who nodded in reply. "Miss Weasley, Mister Potter, the hour grows late. We will discuss destroying the Horcruxes in the morning when we are all fresh. Until then, I will secure the Horcruxes back in Mister Potter's trunk. I suspect the two of you have things to catch up on other than dark objects. Hassit will show you to the guest quarters where Miss Weasley can warm herself by your fire. I will expect that she will be in her dormitory before curfew," Professor McGonagall said with a wink that only Harry could see. She then gave a mild clap, summoning Hassit. "Hassit, please show Miss Weasley and Mister Potter to the guest quarters. The parlour shall admit them both, but the inner quarters shall be keyed to Mister Potter only," she instructed. Hassit nodded and then curtsied, leading the two teenagers out of the Headmistress' office.

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When Hassit left the guest quarters the fire was roaring away in the parlour fireplace, the bed was turned down and Ginny desperately needed to use the loo.

"What's wrong," Harry asked. "You look uncomfortable."

"I need to use the loo, but I suspect that if I try to use yours that I'll set off the bloody alarm and get knocked on my arse for good measure," Ginny said, eyeing the open doorway to Harry's quarters where she could see the doorway to Harry's facilities tantalizing her.

"How about one of the public lavatories?" Harry asked.

"The nearest girl's lavatory is on the other side of the castle, next to the Great Hall," Ginny whinged.

"How about this one?" Harry asked, opening a door next to the bookcase.

"I knew that there was a reason that I loved you," Ginny said as she gave him a fervent, but brief kiss before dashing into the loo.

Harry took the opportunity to pull a few items from his backpack and to transfigure a pair of socks into a pair of shearling slippers, a Hermione invented charm that had impressed him to no end when she'd first demonstrated it. He then took a second pair of socks and with a bit of concentration had a second pair of smaller slippers that he left in front of the fireplace. Above the fireplace mantle was a small crystal hand bell next to a sign that said "for service." He lifted the bell and gave it an experimental tinkle. It was not a surprise when Hassit appeared with an expression on her face that nearly said "yes, what can I do for you?"

"Uh, Hassit, could you bring us some cocoa or wassail or something?" Harry asked.

Hassit nodded sagely and then before disappearing gave a brief wink.

Harry heard the sound of running water and then the door to the loo opened. "I don't know why, but asparagus has a diuretic effect on me, always has," Ginny muttered until she looked up at Harry with a look of horror on her face. "Um, was that too much information?"

He laughed before he grabbed her again, spinning her around. "No, I reckon not, I fell in love with a real girl who burps and has to use the loo and drools a bit when she falls asleep in certain positions," he said, giving her a peck on the end of her nose before he let go of her.

"I do not!" Ginny protested.

"Don't what?" he asked.

"I don't drool when I fall asleep," she said.

"I've got a shirt hanging up in my closet at Grimmauld Place that testifies to the contrary," he said, plopping down into the sofa in front of the fireplace. He patted the cushion beside him. Ginny glared at him before sitting next to him, arms crossed.

"I do *not* drool," she maintained.

"Night of my birthday, we fell asleep talking in front of the fireplace," Harry began, "you had my last bit of Honeydukes' dark chocolate. You were snuggled up something like this," he said, rearranging her head and arms until her head was on his shoulder and her arms were wrapped loosely around him. "I dozed off around the same time, but I woke up when the clock struck midnight, knowing that I had to get you home before your parents turned off their Floo connection. After I woke you and stuffed you into the Floo, I discovered that my shoulder was quite damp."

"Wasn't drool," she insisted, putting on a pout.

"Had a faint brown tint to it that smelled like Honeydukes' dark chocolate. The rest of the shirt smelled like you, which is why I still haven't washed it. I'd give it a good strong whiff before going to bed some nights when I was missing you terribly," he said.

"I don't drool *much*," she said, poking him in the ribs. "That's so sweet – did you really save that shirt?"

"Of course, I'm not smooth enough to make up a story like that," he said.

"Well, I'll grant you that much, Mister Potter."

Harry put a finger underneath her chin, tilting her head back a few degrees. Lowering his head slowly, he gently pressed his lips against hers, sliding his hands until he was cradling her head gently. When they broke apart several kisses later they sat in silence, enjoying the quiet, the warmth of the fire and the time together after a long separation.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"What I did to deserve you," he whispered. "And you?"

"When did you see the birthmark on my backside?" she said, smiling broadly.

"The morning of my birthday, you were bent over trying to pull some pans out of one of the low drawers in the kitchen. Your pants were low cut and your shirt was riding up," he said.

"So you admit to watching my bum?" she asked.

"Every chance I get. I look down your blouse too," he admitted.

"Tuh! Everyone looks down my blouse, it's the curse of being short," she complained.

"If it bothers you, you could always button all the way up the way Hermione does," he suggested.

"That's not why she does it," Ginny blurted out before she closed her eyes. "Damnation," she muttered.

"Why *does* she button all the way up?" Harry asked, suspecting that he already knew the answer.

"She still has scars from where Dolohov tried to cut her in the Ministry of Magic. Had a bit of a complex about it all last year, thought that she was disfigured or something," Ginny said.

Harry thought about this for a while. "Huh, well, that explains a few things. Doesn't seem to have bothered Ron much though," he said.

"What makes you think my brother knows about the scars?" Ginny asked. "He's as thick as two planks together."

"Like I said, they're not as subtle as they think they are. When things are slow, they like to take picnic lunches on sunny days. One time they came back with smiles on their faces; I wouldn't have noticed a thing except Hermione's blouse was on inside out and her headlights were on," Harry replied.

"Headlights?" Ginny asked.

"The curves she has that Ron doesn't," Harry explained.

"What a perv, you're checking *her* out too," Ginny said in mock indignation.

"Only because I have her best interests at heart," he said.

"You know, knowing you as I do, that's entirely believable," Ginny said.

There was a knock at the door, but before they could rise to answer it, Hassit opened the door, pushing a small cart laden with mugs, carafes and a plate of biscuits. She poured a mug of cocoa from one carafe, handing the mug to Harry and then poured a mug of steaming wassail from the other carafe, handing it to Ginny. She then curtsied and disappeared.

"You know, a girl could get used to service like this," Ginny said, sighing with contentment as she sipped from her mug and snuggled closer to Harry.

"Yeah, Hassit has been very good to us, I'm going to have to commend her to Professor McGonagall when I leave," Harry said.

"You would have to spoil a perfect evening," Ginny said, pouting again. "When are you leaving?"

"It depends on how long it takes to destroy the Horcruxes," he said. "After that, I need to go to the continent for a while."

"What's there?" Ginny asked.

"You mean aside from Gabbi and her family?" Harry asked with a smile, which earned a dig in the ribs from Ginny. "I think I've found a tutor in Occlumency. One of the last things that Snape said to me the night Dumbledore died was that I could never take on Voldemort unless I could close my mind. Notwithstanding the source, Hermione thinks I don't stand a chance fighting him unless I learn Occlumency."

"Speaking of which, where *are* Ron and Hermione?" Ginny asked.

Harry looked at his watch. "I'd say that they're coming back from dinner right about now – they went to spend the weekend with the Grangers. Ron's treating them to a night out on the town as a belated birthday present to Hermione," he said.

"Oh, a meet the parents weekend?" Ginny asked with a knowing smile.

"Something like that," he replied. "Something I think I can skip."

"Why, you plan on dying without ever marrying?" Ginny asked, half joking.

"Well, I'm hoping on taking a pass for now on the dying part, but as I reckon it, I already know the parents fairly well," he said.

"I reckon so," Ginny said, "Gabbi says that Phillipe is quite fond of you."

"Very funny," Harry complained, slipping Ginny a poke in her ribs, "I was thinking more of the red-haired woman who keeps complaining that I'm not getting enough to eat every time she sees me and the equally red-haired man who's so daft about all things Muggle."

"They'll be glad to hear that," Ginny said with a sigh. She began to play with the fringe of his hair, pushing it out of his eyes. "What was it like?"

"What was what like?" Harry asked, thinking that he'd missed the change in topic.

"Your *maskirova* with Gabbi," Ginny explained.

"Is that one of those trick questions that no matter what I say, I'm going to be in trouble?" Harry asked.

"Like 'does this make me look fat?' or 'do you think she's pretty?'" Ginny replied. "Yeah, probably," she said with a smile.

"No, what you're wearing does *not* make you look fat, and yes, Gabbi is pretty, but you're prettier," Harry said.

"Good answer, I'm not sure I believe you, but it's a good answer," Ginny said. "So, what was it like?"

"She's easy to talk to, she's a good dancer, but I didn't particularly like dancing with her."

"Why not?"

Harry blushed. "I'm not sure I can put it into words – here, stand up," he said. "Pretend we're dancing. Yeah, like that," he said, conjuring a tune he'd danced to at the wedding. Ginny sighed as she nuzzled into him. They danced a lazy box step, swaying in time to the music. "You fit, perfectly."

"And Gabbi doesn't?" Ginny said, pulling away slightly to give him a puzzled look.

"Too much separating us when we stood close," Harry said.

"Oh – ohhh!" Ginny said as it dawned on her what Harry was not talking about. "So there is an advantage to being a small busted woman," she said, conjuring another tune before she nestled into place again.

"Definitely," Harry murmured, kissing the crown of her head.

The music stopped but they continued to sway together until Ginny pulled his head down and kissed him.

"What was it like? Kissing her I mean," Ginny asked.

Harry backed away, looking as if he's been slapped. "Sweet Circe, woman, what is it with Gabbi tonight? She's not your rival. I'm not trying to figure out which one of you I love more," he said heatedly.

"Well, excuse me, Harry Potter, but I'm still working out what you've done to me!" Ginny shouted, hands on her hips. "You come breezing into my heart after ignoring me for six years, and then a month later you tell me that everything's off – you have to go kill Voldemort, then you spend the evening of my brother's wedding glued to a glowing Veela, and then the night before you drop out of sight you tell me that everything's fine between us and that you love me after all, but we've got to keep things a secret. I was fine with that, but I'm a girl and I've had these niggling doubts."

"What sort of doubts?" Harry asked.

"Why me, why not Gabbi? You could have your pick of witches, here or anywhere, but you say it's me, but I know I'm not all that," Ginny said, pushing her hair back in frustration with both hands.

Harry held his arms open. "C'mere," he intoned, pulling her into a standing embrace. One arm was wrapped around the small of her back, the other stroking her hair. "You're funny and brave and smart and good looking enough that when you move I stop whatever I'm doing so I can watch you. I've almost sliced my thumb a number of times doing that in the Great Hall. It was one of the first things that tipped Hermione off that I fancied you. You know when to talk and you know when to let me be – when I'm being stupid you call me on it faster than any of my other friends and you don't give a hoot that I'm the Chosen One and you're not particularly impressed that I'm the Boy Who Lived and you hate Tom Riddle as much as I do, maybe more. You don't have to use magic to make me want you," he said, kissing her temple softly. "And to answer your earlier question, Gabbi's not a bad kisser, but when she gets worked up it's like kissing a vacuum hose."

He could feel her diaphragm spasm as she began laugh. He couldn't see her lips purse, but he heard her make a whistling, sucking sound.

"Schoooooo - ooh, that's got to be attractive," she said.

"Only if you like to count marks after a date," he said.

"Don't you?" she asked playfully.

"Not particularly," he said.

"I'll try to remember that."

*Later they both looked back at that evening as a turning point in their relationship, although the reasons varied according to the circumstances of whoever was telling the tale. At midnight they had a bit of a spat when Harry wanted to walk Ginny back to the Tower, with Ginny insisting that she was paying too high a price keeping their relationship under wraps to blow it on a silly walk through the castle. Harry relented, both because he knew she was right and because he didn't particularly want any more conflict that evening.*

*The next morning they had a conference with Professor McGonagall that led to the discovery of a flaw in Dumbledore's reasoning and the discovery of another Horcrux hidden at Hogwarts, causing them to revise their schedule and strategy. A week later the Horcruxes were destroyed and a week after that Harry was in France, having spent an excruciating five days having French vocabulary, syntax and grammar pounded into his brain through magical methods, but that's another story to be told along the way.*

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Disclaimer? Nope, not here, check the author's notes for the first chapter in this series.