

In the Shadow of a Damaged Heart

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In the Shadow of a Damaged Heart

by [CavalryofWoah](#)

Summary

Ginny Weasley knows a lot of things she shouldn't. She knows a lot about the Order of the Phoenix, and a lot about Harry Potter, and a lot more than anyone else does about Tom Riddle.

Notes

Chapter titles are lyrics from I'm Not Your Hero by Tegan and Sara, as is the main title.

A huge thanks to my beta and bestie Ashy for all her help and impassioned ranting.

Learning All I Know Now (Losing All I Did)

Ginny sat at the bottom of the stairs, gently flicking dungbombs at the door to the kitchen, where the Order of the Phoenix was just beginning their meeting. Once certain no charms were in place that would prevent the use of Fred and George's Extendable Ears, she pulled a book into her lap, connected one end of the string to her ear, and released the other end to slide through the carpeting towards the kitchen door, where, she hoped, it would look like a loose thread. Her unfocused eyes followed the lines in her book, occasionally mechanically turning a page, while she listened intently to the Order meeting.

"Who's on Harry duty this week, Kingsley?" That was her father speaking, doubtless close to the door to be so much clearer than the other pre-meeting whispers in the room.

"I think Emmaline has a turn tomorrow, as well as Dedalus Diggle. Not sure who has it the next day, though."

"Alright, ladies and gentlewizards, if I may have your attention please. I know everyone is very busy, and these things tend to drone on, so I'll make my opening statements quick," said the friendly, yet authoritative voice of Dumbledore.

The kitchen quickly descended into silence. His idea of opening statements reminded Ginny of nothing so much as his speech at the beginning of every Hogwarts term; short, to the point, and very aware of how tired his audience was. The meeting began with an expression of Dumbledore's pride in the work they had done in his absence, and a few key points he told them he planned to discuss in-depth later. Continuing on to the meat of the meeting, he quickly got down to business.

"I regret not having personally been to the last few Order meetings, but dealing with the Ministry, among other things, has occupied rather a lot of my time as of late. As many of you doubtless know, my address to the International Confederation of Wizards on the subject of Voldemort's return was met with a slightly unexpected amount of backlash, and I have been... rather forcefully retired from the post of Supreme Mugwump. It is relevant to note that the vote against me was heavily carried by Ministry of Magic employees, indicating a disturbing belief in the official policy of Minister Fudge on the subject of Voldemort."

Here Dumbledore gave a barely audible sigh, probably at the flinch that traveled the room at the use of You-Know-Who's name, and muttered whispers between the previously unaware members started up again in the background, including a few muttered agreements from various ministry employees.

"I agree, my friends, it *was* a harsh blow, but I shan't complain unless they get rid of my Chocolate Frog cards. I have, however, recently heard from Hagrid, who tells me that despite a cold welcome, he feels he is making progress with the giants. Whether this progress is in convincing them of Voldemort's return, convincing them not to follow him, or simply in earning a place among them, he neglected to say."

“Typical,” a voice Ginny recognized as Professor McGonagall harrumphed, as Ginny’s mind started spinning with this new piece of information.

So Hagrid had been sent to the giants to turn them against You-Know-Who. Well, that explained why she had yet to see the friendly Care of Magical Creatures teacher arrive for any of the Order meetings, or indeed at all. But was he safe with them? As a half-giant he’d be smaller than all of them, and Hagrid aside, giants weren’t known for being friendly. Even without the threat of full-blooded giants, there was still the fact that his presence at a giant colony was based on it being under threat from You-Know-Who, and if he sent either a delegate or an attacking force, Hagrid would be in big trouble.

“Still,” McGonagall continued, “doubtless progress on any of those subjects is far better than no progress at all. What are we to do if he isn’t back in time for the start of term, Albus? Professor Grubbly-Plank again?”

“Yes, that was my plan. Some of the students will talk, but I have made the arrangements for her return, and other than Harry, Ms. Granger, and the younger Weasley children, I doubt many will care enough to make a fuss about where he is or what he’s doing.”

From there the Order meeting switched to reports from various members, including one from Kingsley on the ongoing hunt for Sirius, one from her father on unrest at the Ministry, supported by Tonks, one from Moody on various precautions he felt they should take (including a fifteen minute lecture on how owls were no longer a safe method of communication that rather helped Ginny’s perspective on not telling Harry a thing while he was with his Muggle family), and, most interestingly of all, a short report from Snape on the current goings-on of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and his circle of Death Eaters.

“He is still focused on obtaining the object, through any means he can find. Recently, he has begun discussions of ways to force someone else to bring the object out of its safeguards. I believe he will first attempt to use one of his Death Eaters, or else use the Imperius Curse. As, so far as we know, Potter is the only other person capable of doing this, I recommend he be monitored even more heavily in the future. Look for signs not only of danger to him, but danger from him. Any information he gets from that scar of his is suspect. We do not yet know if You-Know-Who has realized the possibilities of manipulation available through the mark, or even how much Potter receives, but in this case we *cannot* be too careful.”

Through the dim haze of her shock, Ginny noted that Snape continued to bitterly spit out *Potter* as if the word was an unpleasant bug found in his food, one whose existence had personally offended him. While fully aware that Harry received warnings through his scar of You-Know-Who’s growing power, she had not considered how dangerous it would be if You-Know-Who controlled the effect he had on Harry. Moreover, she was puzzled by thoughts of what “the object” could be, why You-Know-Who wanted it, and why only *Harry* could apparently get it for him.

The rest of the meeting droned on, just reports of things she and the others had already overheard, and as it came to a close Ginny slipped away up the stairs, taking all evidence of her eavesdropping with her. Ron would be *so* jealous he had missed this to deal with ankle-biting slippers.

A week later, Ginny had still not found the time to tell Ron, Hermione, and the twins what had happened at the last Order meeting. They had been kept carefully separate in their cleaning, working only in ones, twos, and threes, never all five together. When the cleaning was done at the end of the day, the teenagers were too tired even to consider the information they gleaned from the adults, let alone pass it on. They had time only for a few heated discussions of Dumbledore's message to them, a repeated order to not tell Harry anything.

By the time Ginny got a moment of peace to think about what she had heard, another meeting had been held, with no Dumbledore and no real information, and all attention was on that, rather than the meeting she had never told them the contents of.

"Wotcher, Ginny!" Tonks said, poking her head up into the attic. Said head was currently covered in a lot of very curly brown hair, rather like Hermione's, and her eyes were a pretty brown to match it.

"Hello, Tonks," Ginny grunted, struggling to move a small table that appeared to have been used for beheading the house elves that hung on the walls of 12 Grimmauld Place. Fred and George were supposed to be helping her, but without Mrs. Weasley to enforce this, they had quickly returned to their room to work on something they had recently acquired from Mundungus Fletcher.

Tonks quickly came up the stairs to help her, grabbing an end and moving in the same general direction Ginny was heading.

"Merlin, this thing is disgusting, it's *sticky*. Oh, back away, let me use my wand. Where to?"

"It's supposed to go to the incineration piles in the drawing room," Ginny said, now following a grimacing Tonks and a floating table down the stairs, glad she didn't have to figure out how to get it down several flights of stairs by herself. "What're you doing here, I thought there wasn't another Order meeting till next week?"

"I'm not here for a full Order meeting, no. Snape and I have to make private reports to Dumbledore tomorrow night, and since I'm off work on Saturdays I thought I'd come help out, maybe cheer up my favorite cousin," Tonks replied cheerfully, now carefully guiding the floating table into the disgusting drawing room. Once that was done she aimed a cleaning spell at her contaminated hands, and wilted when the sticky substance covering them merely started dripping, as if watered down. "Oh, bother. We'll have to clean this off the hard way, Molly's busy and I wouldn't trust those brothers of yours not to think that making this even harder to get off would be funny."

Luckily the first floor bathroom had two sinks and Mrs. Weasley's favorite brand of magical soap, so Ginny and Tonks scrubbed side by side for several minutes, waging war on the substance Ginny was valiantly trying to forget was probably house elf blood.

“So why do you and Snape need to make a special report?” Ginny asked, tongue sticking out from between her teeth as she glared at her still-disgusting palms and dumped another dollop of soap on.

“Well,” Tonks said, distracted by figuring out why her fingernails were now turning a nasty shade of purple. “It’s two different reports on what I assume are unrelated topics, and Dumbledore was in town to lobby with the Ministry already, which is good ‘cause I can’t go to Hogwarts without good reason, the Ministry are monitoring it carefully right now. I’m not working with Snape, and I’m glad, he’s more of a downer than Mad-Eye if you can believe that.”

Ginny, who could easily believe it, having had a great many miserable Potions classes with Snape over the past three years, merely nodded.

“Anyway, he has an urgent report on the Death Eaters, and I have some interesting details on Fudge’s recent address to the Auror department. Nothing really important on my end, nothing that would require a special meeting, but if Dumbledore’s already here it’s better he hears it sooner than later. Personally, I’m just hoping Dumbledore lets me stay to hear Snape’s report. A lot of his work for the Order is so hush-hush none of the rest of us get to hear it. Mad-Eye says it’s how the Order was run the first time, no one knowing what anyone else was doing unless they were involved, and sometimes not even then. He calls it a sensible safety precaution, and the old geezer is probably right, but I’m still curious.”

“So he spies for the Order, but none of you even get to hear his reports?” Ginny carefully attempted to keep her thoughts on the subject of curiosity despite security precautions off her face.

“Oh yeah, half the time we have no idea how he got his information or from who, but it’s always good intel, no sign Voldy-shorts is feeding him false leads,” Tonks replied, showing no sign she had noticed Ginny’s frustration. “We have to be careful what we act on though, or else You-Know-Who will realize we have a spy in his inner circle. I really shouldn’t tell you anymore though Gin, or Dumbledore and, more importantly, your mother, will kill me.”

Ginny sighed in frustration, having hoped to get more details on Tonks’ report on Fudge from her after finishing the Snape discussion. “I understand. We should probably go interrupt Mum now anyways, I’ve got most of it off me but your fingernails look like they’re about to fall off.”

In her dreams Ginny is eleven years old. In her dreams Ginny is always eleven years old.

She stands in front of a stone wall, one hand carrying a bucket of unnaturally red blood, the opposite hand dipping two fingers into it. Her face is stone cold while her fingers move over the wall, reaching up on her tiptoes so it looks like someone taller wrote the words.

Tears drip silently down her face, but she never hesitates. Eventually she steps back, bloody fingers gripping her wand as she casts an unfamiliar spell to stick the warning to the walls.

“THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR... BEWARE.”

Slowly, unwillingly, tears still falling from her blank eyes, Ginny feels her lips curl up in a harsh smile. She drops the bucket to the cold stone floor with a splash, its contents mixing with the water on the ground. She feels the warm blood splash her robes, cool water now up to her ankles. And as soft footsteps draw near, she closes her eyes and opens her mouth to hiss, and hears the whisper of scales on stone and a sharp meow of surprise.

“Ginny? Ginny, wake up!” Ginny thrashed, tangled in her sheets, while a cold hand shook her by the shoulder.

“Wh-what? ‘Mione?” Ginny gasped around the salty tears on her lips. Her friend was standing over her bed, still resting a comforting hand on Ginny’s bony shoulder, concern bright in her large dark eyes. Slowly Ginny sat up, pulling away from Hermione’s hand, untangling the sheets that had wrapped around her legs in the night.

Hermione walked away from Ginny, turning on the lights and returning to sit on the foot of her bed, examining the redhead more closely in the light as she wiped away tears. “I’m here, y’know. If you ever want to talk about all these nightmares you keep having.”

“I...I know, Hermione, and I appreciate the offer, I do, but it’s old news. It’s easier if I just focus on the current problem when I’m awake, not dwell on something that happened years ago. I’m sorry if I disturbed you, now or... or before.”

“Ginny, the only reason I’m disturbed is because I’m concerned for you. Gin, you were...you were hissing in your sleep. Crying, thrashing, and hissing. I’m worried, and maybe actually talking about your problems will help,” Hermione pleaded, wrapping her hands in Ginny’s comforter as she clenched her fists.

“Thanks, but I don’t feel like talking. Let’s just get to sleep, Dumbledore’s coming tomorrow and I thought you wanted to try and talk to him about Harry again,” Ginny dismissed, pulling her top sheet up and turning on her side, back to her friend. Hermione sighed, and after a moment stood up to flick off the lights and go back to her bed.

“Goodnight, Gin.”

Ignoring her in a pretense of sleep, lying motionless under the covers, Ginny turned her thoughts to Dumbledore’s upcoming visit. And, from that, to the possible contents of Snape’s urgent report. Puzzled, and rubbing her fingers together in search of the blood she could still feel on them, Ginny lay in bed for several more hours, waiting for dawn creep through the small, ornate window. By the time six am pulled around, and Ginny was standing up quietly to dress and go downstairs, she had come to three conclusions.

Whatever Snape was doing, surely he would be less effective once he returned to Hogwarts, and his primary sources of information became pureblood teenagers who rarely confided in teachers if they could help it.

She would not stand by and let Tom Riddle and his minions hurt anyone.

And she never wanted anybody to enter her head without permission again.

Perhaps, she thought, the solution to these problems is the same.

After a day of puttering around the dank house, tackling the tasks her mother assigned, Ginny was more than ready to sit down when Snape, Tonks, and Dumbledore arrived for their meeting. Unfortunately, as her mother wasn't part of the meeting, and the kitchen was needed for it, Mrs. Weasley was still going full bore, chivvying the various teenagers along out of the way of the adults downstairs. Thankfully, Ginny had planned for this while lying awake that morning, and before too long had managed to innocently direct her mother to a hallway she knew currently contained one of Fred and George's latest illegal acquisitions.

Listening carefully for the distant sound of yelling to start, Ginny collapsed on the bottom of the stairs with a sigh, grateful her father was on guard duty for "the object" and needn't be distracted.

For a brief moment her head dropped into her hands, her back slumped, and she rubbed at the purple bags under her tired eyes. Just as suddenly as she had slumped, she took a deep breath and sat up straight, arranging the Extendable Ear under the rug until she thought it looked suitably nondescript. She was just in time, for she found that Tonks had already finished her report during the execution of Ginny's distraction plot; it appeared she had not been allowed to stay, for Snape was talking candidly, which he would never have done in the young Auror's presence.

"Dumbledore, if the Minister is about to begin interfering at Hogwarts we *must*!"

"I understand your concerns, Severus, but we cannot act on this information without compromising your cover. If Lucius Malfoy said this to you in confidence, he will doubtless realize who alerted us to the issue," came the quiet voice of Professor Dumbledore, cutting off Snape's argument. "Besides, if they do intend to interfere, we shall find out soon enough. There is nothing we can do now but continue to prepare for the worst, and attempt to find yet another Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"You know my opinion on this matter. It is the post I originally applied for, and one I would still prefer," Snape said, his voice like oil; smooth and slimy.

"I am aware of your opinion, yes, but not only would that leave me in search of a Potions Master, I also have no desire to find out what kind of foul fate the post would bring you. No, not this year, Severus. Not this year."

"If that is all," Snape muttered bitterly, "then we should be on our ways."

His almost stomping footsteps drew closer. Started into movement, Ginny leapt before she looked, and, dropping her unread book, she pulled the door open and stopped a mere inch from the glaring Professor Snape.

She stumbled back a few feet, drew herself up to her (still rather short) full height, and looked around him to where Dumbledore stood, surprise in his twinkling blue eyes.

“Hello, Professor. I’m sorry to disturb you, but I’m afraid this is rather important,” she said, quietly but clearly, still avoiding the sinister look on Snape’s face.

“Of course, Ms. Weasley. If you could excuse us, Professor Snape?” Dumbledore said, focusing more intently on Ginny.

“Actually, Professor...it’s probably best if he stays. Assuming you hear me out fairly, you’ll doubtless want his input.” By now Ginny’s stomach was turning--Snape’s impressive glare still on the top of her head, one dark eyebrow now raised--fully considering her actions once more. Mutely, he opened the door further and turned back into the kitchen, crossing his arms as he sat down in one of the harsh wooden chairs next to Dumbledore, looking unspeakably out of place.

Before she could mentally talk herself out of it, Ginny slipped through the door after Snape, surprised he hadn’t made a comment about her wasting his time. She had no idea that, in the dim light of Grimmauld Place, stubborn chin tilted up, red hair shining around her pale face, she looked rather like a young Lily Evans.

Ginny drew in another deep breath, taking a seat opposite Dumbledore. Her clasped hands on the table in front of her, stubbornly ordering them not to shake, she did her best to look Dumbledore in the eye.

“I want to be a spy for the Order,” Ginny said strongly, before she lost her courage.

This did not appear to be what either of them had expected her to say.

“Preposterous, Weasley, simply preposterous!” Snape spat, drawing himself up to tower over her from across the table, dark eyes furious in his wan, greasy face. Ginny, however, kept her face carefully blank, eyes focused on Dumbledore.

“Ms. Weasley, you are aware that you are neither of age nor a member of the Order of the Phoenix? As such, you are ineligible for such a position,” he said calmly, surprise quickly controlled.

“Yes, Professor. I’m also aware that that’s a load of rubbish,” she replied, still ignoring the now spluttering Snape.

“How so, Ms. Weasley?” Dumbledore appeared now to be torn between grave seriousness and unexpected amusement.

“I can help the Order in ways the adults can’t. And it seems to me that, from what I’ve been overhearing, you can’t really afford to turn down my offer, sir. Either you think my age makes me unreliable, or it makes it unacceptable to put me in the line of danger, and both of those are stupid reasons, Professor, because I am reliable, and I am already in danger. I am already going to die. And don’t tell me I’m not going to die. We both know that age doesn’t stop Voldemort, and before this war is over too many people will be dead. This war might last

another fourteen years, or it might last one, and that depends not on what the Ministry is doing, but on what we are,” she said, swallowing against her dry throat.

She quickly continued before they could get a word in, torn between trying to appear confident and calm, and not letting them cut her off before she finished her argument.

“My age *is* relevant, not as a detractor of usefulness, but a benefit. I can go places Professor Snape can’t, talk to people who won’t talk to him, or who would give him different answers. It won’t be hard for me to talk to either the blood purists or the Order sympathizers at Hogwarts. If this war does drag on, it’ll be important to know what the coming generation of talent is going to do, who they’re going to side with. If it doesn’t, then I can assure you that Sirius isn’t the only adult who wants to tell teenagers what kind of danger they’re in; and the twins aren’t the only students skilled in spying on their parents. The students know more about their families than you think, and they won’t be turning that information over to teachers, I know that for certain,” Ginny said, brown eyes fierce, lit up with a determination reminiscent of her mother. Her clasped hands had tightened their grip, leaving white and red splotches on her skin from the pressure.

“Ms. Weasley, while you do have a point, I am afraid that inducting you into the Order while you remain at school is strictly against our policies. Hogwarts is the safest place for young witches and wizards, and no harm will come to you there while I can prevent it,” Dumbledore replied, still considering her words.

“Professor, I didn’t believe that even before I overheard you talking about how Malfoy and the Ministry are preparing to somehow interfere there. Hogwarts hasn’t kept us safe.”

Here Snape looked like he wanted to interrupt, but Ginny leaned forward intently and continued.

“It didn’t keep me safe from Malfoy and Riddle. It didn’t keep the students safe from me. It didn’t keep the Dementors from harming students; it didn’t keep Sirius out when you still thought he was a murderer. Nor did it keep a Death Eater out; nor did it prevent the heavily guarded and regulated Triwizard tournament from being severely tampered with. Every year, since before I arrived at the school, students have nearly died... students have died, largely in plots from Voldemort. Small, scattered pieces of Voldemort. And now he’s back. Stronger than ever. And I know what he can do, Professor, I *know*. I know what he planned back then, I know what he did. I know what he asked Professor Slughorn about, I know what he used Myrtle’s death for. I know what that diary was, and how easily Malfoy got it into the school. So don’t you dare tell me Hogwarts is safe.”

Dumbledore sat up, eyes sharpening dramatically, while a now silent Snape glanced between them, outraged but more considering, more confused. Clearly, he hadn’t been filled in on the subject of the horcruxes, but Ginny was confident that Professor Dumbledore had worked out the truth the second he saw Riddle’s destroyed diary. Finally, he would take her seriously.

“While I see your point, Ms. Weasley, there are still laws-”

“How many laws are we breaking just sitting in this house, Professor? How many laws will we break while the Ministry keeps throwing walls up to prevent us making any progress?”

“Ms. Weasley, as a child your parents are the final authority on your involvement, and they have made it very clear that they do not want you, nor any of your underage siblings, to be involved in the slightest. I cannot ignore their wishes and put you in harm’s way without their knowledge and consent. Which, as I’m sure you can agree, we would be highly unlikely to get.”

“I...” Ginny, for a brief moment, was struck by an image of her mother’s face if she knew what her daughter was currently doing. It did not, however, stop her for long. “I’m not a child. Not anymore. I love my mother, but she doesn’t realize that there are some things she can’t protect us from. I agree with her, we shouldn’t have to worry about these things; we shouldn’t have to lie, and spy, and hide, and fear for our lives, and fight for our lives. We *shouldn’t* have to, but we *do*.”

She unclasped her aching hands and instead placed them in the pockets of her jacket, leaning back in her chair for the first time. Her face was still, jaw set.

Snape, apparently regaining the ability to speak through his shock, was quick to renew his complaints.

“Even if you were of age, you are hopelessly untrained. You have the typical Gryffindor subtlety--approximately the same amount as an ox. Your mind is doubtless open to any intrusion, and any sensitive information you were to receive would be easily obtained by the enemy. I sincerely dread your idea of leading questions. You would have no idea what to look for or how to find it. You are, in short, useless,” Snape sneered.

Ginny bristled, preparing her response, but Dumbledore beat her to it.

“Professor Snape,” Dumbledore said quietly, “I would remind you that even outside of school grounds, negative comments about another Hogwarts House are uncalled for and inappropriate. Ms. Weasley’s mind, I think you will also find, is both more closed off and more cunning than you might anticipate. If I am not mistaken, she has, in the past two years, checked out every book on mental intrusion and exclusion available in the Hogwarts library, including those in the restricted section.”

Of course he would keep track of that, Ginny thought. She was unsure if ‘closed off and cunning’ was supposed to be a compliment or not. “I also checked out every book that mentioned possession, cursed objects, souls, and immortality. I noticed that several books Tom referenced had been removed; I’m glad.”

“Books, while a... decent start, cannot teach the true practice of Occlumency and Legilimency,” Snape said, resentful of being corrected. “And the girl still knows nothing of being a spy, Dumbledore. You cannot seriously be considering this?”

“You cannot deny, Severus, that she is right; the students are a valuable source of information, one that is in most cases beyond your reach. And while her spying experience is not extensive, it appears to be quite successful. Or did you miss how she is aware of far more than I assume Molly Weasley would ever tell her children?”

“She is also right here,” Ginny snapped, sitting up once more, shoulders tight as their decision was made.

“I still would not recommend this,” Snape insisted.

“While your opinion is appreciated, I believe Ms. Weasley would be an asset to our information gathering process. If you are, however, so concerned with her mental defences, I shall let you be in charge of testing them, and bringing them up to what you deem an acceptable standard. Preferably before the beginning of the term, busy though I know you are, Severus. You are also in charge of teaching her everything you believe she will need to know to be an effective spy once at Hogwarts--without informing any of the other members of the Order of the Phoenix.”

Snape gaped unattractively with shock, though he quickly transformed it into a glare and turned it on Ginny. Not even the prospect of secret lessons with Snape could dim Ginny’s mood at the moment. Fighting to keep her pride and excitement off her face, her jaw and eyes nonetheless softened, and her back muscles loosened. But her ordeal was not over yet.

“I don’t suppose you have a plan to begin obtaining this information?” Dumbledore asked, redirecting their attention.

“I know Malfoy loves to run his mouth about all the things his father gets up to, but starting there is too obvious. He wouldn’t believe me, and my brothers would kill me. I thought the Ravenclaws would be a good place to start.”

“And how will you gain their trust?” Snape snorted, arms crossing even more firmly.

“Isobel MacDougal. Ravenclaw, my year. Her mother is head of the Obliviators. Spends a lot of time running around after Muggles, cleaning up careless wizards’ messes. She and Isobel don’t get along very well, mostly because Isobel thinks that taking care of Muggles is a waste of time. She doesn’t hate them, but... she definitely thinks they’re beneath her. Fairly moderate, but she hangs out with a lot of the more extreme Slytherins and Ravenclaws. I sit next to her in Ancient Runes, and not only is she apparently a good tutor, she’s a terrible gossip.”

“Yes, I am familiar with Mrs. MacDougal’s work in the Ministry. It is disturbing to discover that a witch with such a progressive stance on Muggle relations has raised such a close-minded daughter,” Dumbledore said, a frown pulling the corners of his large white beard down even farther. “This seems like a fine place to start. Very well, Ms. Weasley. Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix. You will not be allowed to enter or participate in meetings; but you will be, within reason, informed of what goes on in them. You will attend Occlumency and information gathering lessons with Professor Snape once a week. While you stay with the Order, I will ask Sirius if we can have use of Regulus’ old bedroom for them. It is, to my knowledge, the only room that is both hospitable and unused.”

“Yes, Professor Dumbledore.”

“You must tell no one, not even your siblings and friends, what you are doing. If any among the Order are told of your position, you will be informed. You are not to inform any of them

on your own unless it is a true emergency, in which case you will tell them ‘from the ashes we renew’ and they will render you any possible assistance. Once at Hogwarts, you will continue meeting Professor Snape weekly, whether Occlumency lessons are still required or not, and begin each with a report on what you have learned in your spying. Those will be passed on to me. He will then inform you of the contents of the latest Order meeting. Please take care not to write anything down, Ms. Weasley. There is no telling what hands it could fall into.”

“Oh, don’t worry Professor. I got over my diary stage rather quickly,” Ginny said wryly.

“Yes, I suppose that would be enough to turn anyone off them,” Dumbledore agreed, beard twitching in amusement. “Now, I really must be on my way. I will ask Sirius about his brother’s bedroom on my way out, Severus, so there should be no need for the two of you to talk. I leave you with Professor Snape to sort out the details of your Occlumency lessons, Ginevra. Farewell.”

Dumbledore stood quickly, and with nary a backward glance, swept out of the room in a swirl of magnificent purple robes; the effect was rather ruined when he had to stoop to avoid losing his hat to the doorway, however.

Snape sighed harshly, turning in his chair to watch the Headmaster leave. A deeper than usual frown tugged at his thin lips when he turned back to face Ginny.

“You will report to me in Regulus Black’s old bedroom at exactly five AM in two days time. The lesson should be concluded before the other occupants of the house awaken, but if they question your absence you will tell them that I have found some objects of use in there and Dumbledore has asked you to assist me in sorting the useful from the useless. I am unlikely to be available consistently, and as such our lessons will be scheduled no more than two days in advance. I expect you to arrive promptly, and be prepared to work. Dumbledore’s orders or no, I do not have time to spare, and if you do not take this seriously I will no longer waste it on you. Do you understand me, Weasley? This is not a joking matter.”

“I understand, sir. I’m not joking in the slightest. Thursday, five AM. I won’t be late,” Ginny said. She didn’t like Snape any more than he liked her, but he was her ticket to getting what she wanted, and so she was willing to be as polite and mature as it took to get him to cooperate.

“See that you are not,” Snape sneered, knocking his chair back as he left.

Not a minute after he left, half the Weasley clan clammered into the kitchen, Ron whining about the twins having turned his hair a rather unflattering shade of mustard yellow. Mrs. Weasley, flustered, stressed, and caught between yelling at the twins and trying to turn Ron’s hair back to its normal bright red, never noticed that Ginny was already in the room. And, distracted by her yelling, neither did anyone else.

Sometimes It Feels Like The Side That I'm On (Plays The Toughest Hand)

Chapter Summary

Sirius learns a bit more about how dangerous Hogwarts has become since he left school, Ginny's lessons with Snape begin, and the twins find out the answer to a question they've been asking for years.

The day before Ginny's first lesson with Snape dawned cold and wet. She had a *very* clear knowledge of this, since she was awake to see it. A nightmare had woken her up shortly before three, and sleep was thereafter elusive. At a quarter past she had given up and crawled out of bed, taking her dark blue jeans and pale green cardigan to change in the bathroom, leaving the lights off to give Hermione a few more hours of sleep. Her skin was still covered in goosebumps, and if a shower wouldn't wake everyone up she'd have done more than wash the sweat off the back of her neck.

She crept down the stairs to the basement, guided by the light glowing beneath the cracked kitchen door. Pushing the door open farther, she found Sirius sitting alone at the table, tracing the ornate carvings at the edge with a skeletal finger. He had gained some color while on the run last year, but he was still both pale and thin; far more so than he was in the few pictures he had found of his school days to give to Harry. It took him a moment to notice Ginny standing in the open doorway, but when Sirius looked up he gave her a wan smile and invited her in with a jerk of his head.

She gratefully sank down into a chair next to him, and he silently summoned her a mug and pushed his half-full teapot over to her, warming charm still in effect. After half a summer of mutually sleepless nights, this was a familiar routine. Ginny poured herself some of the tea and rested her head on one hand, staring into the steaming amber liquid. After a moment she splashed some milk into it and watched the pale cloud rise and blend into the black tea.

"So, I think everyone knows why I can't sleep," Sirius said quietly, turning in his chair to look at her, "but what's been keeping you awake all summer?"

"Just..." for a second Ginny considered brushing him off as she had her first week at Headquarters, but the early-morning stillness crept into her bones and loosened her tongue. "I just can't sleep without getting trapped in memories. Every time I close my eyes I'm right back where I started. And it's... it's pathetic, because it's been *years* and I should be over this by now, right? It should've gotten better but it *hasn't* and I can't tell anyone because they've all moved on and I'm the only one who hasn't."

She buried her head in her arms, face down on the table, hands curled into fists to stop their shaking. Sirius didn't make the mistake of touching her, and instead took a drink of his tea

and sighed.

“Believe me, Ginny, I know exactly how you feel. It’s been fourteen years since James and Lily died, longer for all the other friends I lost in the first war, and it feels like the world moved on without me. I spent twelve years unable to do anything but remember all the horrible things I’d seen, all the mistakes I made. I imagined the look on James’ face when he realized You-Know-Who was there, that Peter was either dead or a traitor, and everyone else got over it. The night I lost everything, the whole wizarding world drank and sang in celebration.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Ginny said, lifting her head from the table to stare at the dark circles under his eyes, just like hers. His face was aged prematurely, lined with decades of exhaustion and grief; first he was at war, then all his friends either died, betrayed him, or believed he was a murderer. Abandoned in prison for over a decade, he escaped to find the war beginning again.

This must be his worst nightmare, Ginny realized sadly. Did he look around the Order meetings wondering who would be the first to die? Whose betrayal would bring about their bitter end? She wondered what she would lose before the war was over for good. In fourteen years, would her face look like that? Sad, thin, haunted by her experiences?

“Ginny,” Sirius said gently, “why can’t you sleep?”

“What... what do you know about Harry’s second year at Hogwarts? My first?”

“Not much. I know something happened with the Chamber of Secrets, and Hagrid was in Azkaban for a while, poor bugger. Can’t have done anything wrong, knowing Hagrid, and they let him out soon enough. But I wasn’t really in a position to find out while it was happening. I tried to find out about Harry’s time at Hogwarts once I got out, but I couldn’t get much more than that,” Sirius said casually, speeding through the mention of Azkaban as quickly as possible. He started tracing the table again to distract himself.

Closing her eyes, Ginny took a deep breath and told him the bare bones. How Malfoy had given her the diary before the term started; about the kind, charming head boy that had written back. Sirius grabbed her hand and let her squeeze it sometime between beginning to lose bits of her memory and find blood on her robes, and watching Hagrid be carted away for things she knew she was doing. By the time Ginny got to what she had been told of Harry’s daring rescue her heart was racing, and tears distorted the freckles on her cheeks. She barely choked out why Malfoy had done it; how he had used her as a pawn to fight her dad’s Muggle Protection laws.

Ginny dropped her head, breathing chaotically, crying in stops and starts. She fought for control of her emotions, but when Sirius pulled her into a sideways hug she gave in and cried into his bony shoulder. His jaw was clenched, fury on her behalf brightening his eyes.

“I just want to *sleep*, but I can’t get any peace. I’ve tried everything, but sometimes I feel like I’ll never be alone in my head. And then sometimes it feels too quiet, too empty with just me in here. I hear his voice on repeat and I can’t make it stop. Sometimes I don’t *want* it to stop.”

Sirius didn't patronize her, didn't try to find platitudes to make her stop crying. He just sat there in silence, letting her cry as long as she needed to.

When the rest of the house trooped down to start on breakfast sometime around seven, Ginny had wiped off her tears and washed her face in one of the bathrooms. Sirius had dumped the tea that went cold while Ginny was having what he called "a well earned cry" and made them both fresh, and the Weasley brood found them sitting in comfortable quiet. Ginny was sitting on the counter, looking out of one of the fake, spelled windows at the artificial grey light. Sirius had summoned a book from his room on dragons of the nineteenth century, which (despite having a dragon trainer for a son) Mrs. Weasley sniffed disapprovingly at.

As awful as the crying had been, Ginny did feel better afterward. Telling someone the full truth, the process of Tom going from confidant, to friend, to nightmare, had helped her more than she understood. Sirius was probably the best person she could have told, as well. He was calm but appropriately horrified, comforting without being smothering. She could never have told her mother that.

She spent the rest of the day working with Hermione on the entry level, making more of the furniture useable. It was work done in complete silence, for fear of waking the portraits.

Kreacher came wandering through several times, muttering insults under his breath as he did. Yelling at him would be useless, so Ginny just asked him to pass her the dust cloth on his right. Kindness surprised him into being almost pleasant sometimes, but if she overdid it he ignored her. She had found, however, that a careful mix of respect for his wishes and expectant orders often got him to do what she asked, though he didn't, magically speaking, *have* to.

He also accepted trades. If Ginny offered to let Kreacher keep, say, a harmless picture of one of his old masters, he would often give her whatever dangerous object he was trying to hide from their purge. She thought it was going rather well. He still called her 'the Weasley brat', but that was a nice change from the B word he *used* to call her, and his blood traitor comments had become maybe a hair less disdainful. Maybe.

The cleaning and disinfecting was strenuous, but boring, so Ginny let her mind wander to the next morning. There was an Order meeting that night, and hopefully her time with Snape would include a thorough rundown of everything that happened. Just in case, though, she planned to join the twins for the weekly eavesdropping attempt. Her trust in the adults was limited, and while she would have no choice but to rely on Snape's information while at Hogwarts, she could still double check him at Headquarters.

She also mentally reviewed the things she knew about Occlumency, and wondered what she should expect. Ginny would have to clear her mind and keep him out of her thoughts successfully or she'd never become a real spy. If Potions was any standard of Snape's teaching, there would be few instructions, a lot of practice--and a lot of pointed comments about expecting her to fail. It wouldn't be easy to empty her mind under such circumstances, but if she ever had to use the skill seriously, it wouldn't be under calm, ideal conditions. He

was harsh and unfair; but just like with Potions, if she worked hard enough, he would have to let her continue. He *had* to let her continue. Failure was not an option. Not with the things she had seen in Tom Riddle's head.

After a mostly sleepless night, a long crying jag, and a day of harsh cleaning, Ginny finally slept soundly. She was asleep on top of her covers before Hermione even finished dinner and came up to bed. Unfortunately, Ginny also slept right through the meeting of the Order of the Phoenix. She didn't get a chance to double check Snape during their first meeting after all.

She rose the next day at four, too excited and nervous to oversleep, like the day before an exam. Ginny avoided her favored green, determined to throw her Gryffindor-ness in Snape's face if he was going to insist it defined her completely. Instead, she wore one of her violently red Weasley Christmas sweaters, her embroidered 'G' large and gold on the front. It clashed horribly with her hair, but the look on his face was well worth it--as was the boost of courage it gave her.

She had grabbed tea and toast before Snape arrived, and rather than being late, she was there to open the front door before he risked waking the portrait of Walburga Black (that is to say, before he woke the whole house). He skipped pleasantries, and treated her only to a judging eyebrow. She ignored it and let him in, and followed him silently up to Regulus Black's old room.

It was one of the few Ginny had never been in. Sirius had looked in, and once he determined that nothing in there was immediately deadly, he had closed the door and never opened it again. Of course, if one of her brothers had died, she supposed she wouldn't want to go in their room either. It was probably too painful, whether they had gotten along or not. Regardless, she was curious when she turned on the lights and walked in.

It was a fairly large room, and Ginny could tell that underneath the layer of dust nearly everything was silver and green, including the walls. Yellowed newspaper clippings hung over the bed, below the Black family crest and motto; knowing the kind of person that had inhabited the room, Ginny carefully avoided reading them. There was the typical dark wood furniture of the rest of the house, a few shelves filled with mixed school books and dark magic texts, and a large window that appeared real, not charmed like most at Headquarters. It brought a little more light in, but not much, mostly due to the thick layer of grime on both sides of the pane.

The only really interesting thing in the room was a picture on the far wall of a young teenager she would assume was Sirius, if not for the Slytherin house Quidditch gear. They shared thick, dark hair, regal grey eyes, and cheekbones most girls she knew would kill for.

Snape wasted no such time on curiosity, and quickly cast not only a silencing charm so they could speak freely, but also several diagnostic spells to reveal any hidden dangers. Having lived in the dark magic infested house for weeks, Ginny completely understood the necessity. If she was allowed to use magic to check every single room before she entered, she would have.

Apparently finding nothing of note, Snape turned to her with a glare, the circles under his eyes even darker than usual. Already aware that if not for the lessons they could both be asleep still, Ginny ignored the animosity Snape exuded. This was more important.

“I assume, having read about on the subject, you at least know what Occlumency is, and the basics of how to apply it?” he asked derisively. His sneer seemed to reach a new depth, engraving his face with distaste.

“Occlumency is a magical technique to defend the user’s mind against Legilimency, or any other form of magical mental influence. In short, I try to clear my mind, and prevent you from accessing any memories, emotions, or thoughts. If I do it wrong, you’ll be able to enter and experience anything I don’t suppress,” Ginny replied, pushing down her frustration at his tone.

She should be used to Snape by now, but he still made her feel like dirt. Any grown man who took so much enjoyment in bullying children he was supposed to mentor was, in her mind, a bad person. Order member or no, Ginny would never forgive him for his part in crushing Neville’s spirit. Or for making her first year even more difficult when she was dealing with Riddle. She noted to herself that she should probably suppress those thoughts first, just in case.

“Accurate,” Snape said, the highest praise he’d ever given her. “You should be prepared to suppress your true thoughts and defend yourself with limited to no warning. Similar to a physical attack, no accomplished Legilimens will give you warning before they attempt to invade your mind. You must be ready at all times. To that end, within this room, whatever topic we are currently working on, I will repeatedly attempt Legilimency on you with no warning. You must eventually get to the level of defending specific pieces of information while carrying on a normal conversation. It must be impossible to tell if you are using Occlumency or not. For today, we start with the basics. Keep me out of your mind.

Legilimens. ”

Ginny had half-expected a sneak attack, but her previously clear mind was stuck on Regulus Black in his Slytherin Quidditch robes, and before she could blink she felt herself catapulting back into her head while a claw tore through her thoughts like tissue paper. She had managed to rid her mind of most important information, but she felt Snape rifling through her thoughts quickly. He skimmed past her childhood birthdays, the pranks her brothers played on her, her loneliness after the twins left for Hogwarts, only for the both of them to get stuck on her Sorting.

Ginny sat on the stool, short legs dangling far from the ground. The stern-faced teacher put the large hat on her head, and her thin red hair did little to catch it before it covered her head completely. It slipped over her eyes, and she was almost glad to no longer see the staring faces of her older brothers, the whole Gryffindor table primed to clap another quickly sorted Weasley.

Instead, the Hat hummed in her mind. “Another Weasley, eh? Yes, you have the makings of a great Gryffindor within you, as did the rest.”

Dread mixed with relief in Ginny's heart, which still felt weighed down with lead. She didn't know whether she was more afraid of not fitting in with her family, or of being just another in the line; trapped as a collected set, not chosen as an individual.

"Ah, don't give up yet, girl. I have never Sorted based on 'sets', or by blood. Some families prize certain qualities over others. The teachings of the parents often influence the house their children choose, which has most definitely been the case in your family. You, silly girl, would do as well in Hufflepuff as in Gryffindor, and better than either in Slytherin."

No!

The small part of Ginny that knew this was a memory, years gone, felt Snape's mental claw start in surprise--and with a mental shove his hold was broken. She stumbled back, skin crawling. She was disoriented after being trapped in the feeling of her younger body. Her legs and arms felt several inches too long, and her thick ponytail too heavy. Her head pounded already, but she braced herself before she looked back up at Snape, trying again to clear her mind.

He attacked again immediately, for once wasting no time on bitter taunts. She managed to hold him back for a moment or two, but now Snape seemed to have locked on to her memory, and he brought them right to where they had left off. Ginny struggled, but she was dragged under by a tide of information.

"No?" the Hat asked incredulously. "What do you mean, no?"

No, I can't be a Slytherin, I can't be, that's even worse than Hufflepuff.

"And what," the very affronted Hat asked, "is so wrong with Hufflepuff?"

Ginny thought of the comments her brothers had made, about how Hufflepuff took anyone who didn't belong anywhere else. They were the rejects, the people who were neither brave, nor smart, nor ambitious. She couldn't bear to write home and tell her parents she'd been sorted into Hufflepuff.

"That is more wrong information than I know what to do with. Hufflepuffs are fair, loyal, and hardworking. All these traits mimic their Founder, who, yes, took everyone; but those who can't stay positive and determined fail miserably, and they tend to leave rather quickly. She gave everyone a chance to be individuals, undefined by glory, blood, or intelligence. But they had to actually take the chance she gave them and make the most of it. Yes, you would do well there, but Slytherin is where you truly belong."

No.

"I do not think you understand how this works, Weasley. I tell you where you belong, and you go. You have the cunning, the ambition. A more subtle hand than your brothers, especially that prefect one. Loads of ambition, him, but no subtlety, none at all. You are determined, go to great lengths to succeed, but have no urge to boast of your accomplishments."

No.

“Yes. Rather than fight your way into your brothers’ Quidditch games, you simply watched, learned--and stole their brooms in secret. You dream of being a Chaser, to feel the rush of wind and the excitement as you dart around the opposition and make your perfect shot. Yes, you crave power and satisfaction, but you find the best way to get it; the least opposition and the best reward. You lack no bravery, but you have spades more cool-headed cleverness.”

No!

“Yes! You could prosper in Slytherin. You could be original, independent. The best. Judged for yourself, not blending in with the crowd. You could easily make the Slytherin Quidditch team next year, find out how good you really are, start making your professional Quidditch dreams a reality. You could be fantastic. Just say yes and you can have everything you’ve ever wanted.”

Everything but my family, Ginny thought, eyes watering in the darkness under the Hat. I know what they say about Slytherin. Cowards, blood purists, a breeding ground for Dark wizards. Even if it’s not true, they’d never accept me in Slytherin! They’d probably complain to the Headmaster, demand I be resorted, placed where I belong. With them. They’d never look at me the same way again. Please, Gryffindor, just put me in Gryffindor. It’s bad enough this is taking so long, don’t make this worse on me, please!

“I doubt you realize how big a mistake you are making, Ginevra, but since you do have some aptitude for it, very well.”

“ GRYFFINDOR !”

Snape moved directly from that memory to another, pulling out seemingly random pieces of information, letting whole or partial scenes play out before continuing to the next. They paused repeatedly, either because Ginny broke his hold, or so Snape could rant and snap at her to do better.

Multiple times, he jumped straight into discussion of the Order meeting from the night before, and she had to force her aching brain to work and begin processing new information, lest she miss anything. Then, without warning, he would dive back into her mind, sometimes skimming her surface thoughts while still talking about Kingsley’s progress recruiting for the Order, other times pushing straight for important information he knew she had. He never paused, never gave her a moment to breathe, and over two hours passed before he called a halt to their lesson.

“Do not feel too pleased with yourself, Weasley. This did not go well. I was able to obtain any information from you that I wanted, and the only times I could not find something specific was when you were unable to multitask well enough to hear me say it in the first place,” Snape said sharply. “You will practice, every day, multiple times a day if you know what is good for you. *Clear your mind*, especially before and after sleep. Take the information you know to be important, dangerous, and conceal it. Push it down, below mundane thoughts, and leave it there. Then build a defense around your whole mind. Reinforce it, add to it, do not let it slip even for a second.”

“Yes, Professor,” Ginny mumbled, eyes still unfocused but determinedly standing up straight, chin up. Her head pounded in time with her pulse, but she pushed past it to listen to his words. She had committed herself to this, to being the best. One day of failure wouldn’t discourage her. If anything he said would help, she would take advantage of it.

“Our next lesson will be on Tuesday, at four thirty AM. Teaching you any modicum of skill will clearly take more time than even I anticipated. Before then,” Snape continued, summoning a large, leatherbound book from his bag, “you will read the first five chapters of this, and be ready to discuss them. Go.”

Ginny grabbed the book and went.

The book, as it turned out, was Jeremiah Burke’s *Complete Mental Warfare*. Burke, of course, as in a member of the same pureblooded family that had helped start Borgin and Burke’s dark object shop. As hard as it was to hide books from Hermione, especially while sharing a room with her, Ginny managed.

The information inside of it was, to Ginny, worth half the contents of Gringotts. She quickly read not just the first five chapters, but the entire book well ahead of Snape’s schedule. It was filled with various techniques to conceal information, protect thoughts, and keep people completely out of the Occlumens’ mind--as well as the various ways to breach it and get around defenses.

The central theme of the book was visualization, which included tapping into her ‘magical core’. Similar to the magical core of a wand, Burke wrote, each witch or wizard had a source of magical energy; anything from a spark to a bonfire of magic inside them. Through practice and hard work, the magical core could grow, and in neglect it could wither.

For most witches and wizards, the magical core was indistinct, spread throughout their entire body. Children, apparently, were naturally much more in tune with their magic. Once people learned the use of a wand and spells, most of their instinctual ‘accidental’ magic stopped, and relearning how to use magic wordlessly and wandlessly was often extremely difficult without realigning their magic.

While this made some sense to Ginny, she didn’t fully understand until she got a chance to try it. She had decided to retreat to Regulus’ bedroom for her practice, as it was the only safe, uninterrupted room in the house. The only one who ever went in there was Kreacher, and Ginny knew for a fact that he was currently in the library, cuddling a ratty old pair of pants.

Several meetings with Snape had passed, and while she practiced long and hard, she was unable to do more than occasionally throw him out. He could always get past her defenses. While some of the easier techniques from the book had helped her delay him, they never stopped him cold. Ginny was determined to make this work. Surely this would make her defense more stable. Surely *this* would keep him out.

She sat down on the wood floor and carefully reread the directions in the book for accessing her magical core. Eyes closed, mind quiet, feel for the bubbling under her skin. Imagine the way she felt right before she cast a spell, as the power transferred from her to her wand, amplified before it became reality. At first Ginny was just sitting there trying to slow her breathing, mentally reciting a laundry list of instructions. But after what could have been hours or minutes, she relaxed into the warm sunlight on her skin from the dingy window--and felt what was, indeed, a rather bubbly sensation.

It was a bit like a boiling cauldron; warm from afar but *blistering* up close, in constant, unpredictable motion. As Ginny became more aware of it she could feel it expanding, pushing against her skin, growing warmer and warmer. If she didn't control it she felt like she would burn herself alive, consumed by her own magic.

Ginny struggled against the tide of fire pulling her under, afraid to lose herself, but far from helping it seemed to make it worse. Perhaps containing it wasn't the answer? With a deep breath, like one about to dive into unknown waters, Ginny let go.

All at once it was better. Instead of the fire burning her, it welcomed her. After an eternity of revelling in the feeling, the *rush* of excitement and joy and *power*, she gradually became aware of her body again. As she breathed in, the fire grew, and as she exhaled it fell back.

Like the tide, the rhythm was strong and fairly predictable. On each exhale, she deliberately pushed it a little further back, until it was like a ball of yarn in her chest. Carefully coiled, it could expand back to its full size at a single, gentle tug.

Exhausted, when she returned to her body Ginny only had enough energy to stumble down the stairs to collapse on her bed. Despite it being early afternoon, Ginny slept long and hard. When she woke the next morning only when Hermione got up, she thanked her lucky stars she hadn't had a lesson with Snape to sleep through.

Returning to Regulus' old room when she finished breakfast, Ginny retrieved *Complete Mental Warfare* from the floor and set about fixing herself mental shields, layering them as Burke recommended. Some were smooth and flawless, a flat lake reflecting the sky, giving no hints as to what lay below the surface. Others were rough rock, ready to shred anything foolish enough to scrape against it, and still others were sharp and disorienting, like diamonds.

She layered her thoughts and memories beneath them, the most crucial information the farthest down. Then she reached for the ball of fire that sat next to her heart, pulsing in time with it, and felt all her imagined defenses solidify.

Her mind clear and focused, Ginny met Snape at the door again the next day at four fifteen. It took him over fifteen minutes to break through all of her defenses--and then, for the first time, he made her rebuild them while he watched. He spent three hours critiquing the weaknesses, beating her walls back, forcing her to put more power, more concentration, more deliberation into everything.

This time when Snape left, he nodded to her. Ginny nodded back in surprise, and then went right back to loathing him in the comfort of her defended head. Mutual respect didn't change his horrid personality.

From then on their lessons differed; alternating between a history of the first war and signs of Voldemort's action to look for; students he felt particularly worth investigating and what to expect from the more extreme blood purists; how to find out information without being caught; and how to sort relevant information from the useless. All of these subjects were punctuated by repeated attempts to get into her mind, often catching her by surprise. Of course Snape got through, but increasingly rarely.

"Sirius?"

"Yes?" he replied absently. His mind was clearly still on his Muggle book of motorcycles of the twentieth century.

"How old were you when you joined the Order of the Phoenix? The first time, I mean."

Now Sirius looked up, engaged in the conversation. "Right out of Hogwarts, same as the rest of my lot. I was still seventeen, but James had had an early birthday, he was eighteen at graduation."

"Didn't you want to join before you graduated? Surely there were ways students could have assisted the Order back then," Ginny said, truly curious.

"Well, though most of us with a brain had our suspicions, the Order always operated in secrecy. While I was a student, no one would confirm its existence, let alone recruit me. And, yes, while we knew the war was getting worse, there was nothing we could do but try to learn as much as we could, and help the people suffering."

"What d'you mean?" Ginny asked, momentarily distracted from her initial topic of questioning.

"A lot of the pranks the Marauders pulled in our last three years at Hogwarts were specifically to cheer people up, bring a little life back to the school. So many people had already lost someone, and everyone was afraid, grieving... we tried to bring smiles back to their faces. As frustrated as we made Minnie, our jokes gave them something other than war to talk about," Sirius explained, a nostalgic smile tugging at his mouth.

"Sounds like a good cause to me," Fred said, walking into the kitchen with George close behind on his heels.

The twins were, it seemed, feeling especially confusing that day. They had decided to wear matching blue jeans and awful purple dress shirts, and Ginny distinguished them only by the odd dark stain that had been stuck smeared on George's cheek for the past two days. They each pulled up a chair at the table, George spinning his to sit in it backwards.

“Hullo Fred, George. Bit early for you two, isn’t it?” Ginny asked, scooting away from the sparks thrown from Fred spinning his wand between his fingers.

“Less early-” Fred started.

“-and more late,” George continued.

“You two never went to sleep?” Sirius raised his eyebrows, humor giving a rare liveliness to his face.

“We can sleep when we’re successful!” the twins said simultaneously, with the practiced air of a motto.

“Besides,” George said sheepishly, “we started a time-sensitive project a bit later than intended, and after that was finished it seemed easier just to stay up.”

Sirius didn’t laugh, the way Ginny suspected he would have before Azkaban, but his smile grew large enough to turn the deep furrows on his face into a facsimile of laugh lines.

“We like what you were saying before, don’t we Gred? About using jokes to distract people from utterly depressing circumstances.”

“Oh, absolutely, Forge. The tactic has worked rather well for us in the past, after all.”

“If by ‘well’ you mean ‘completely horribly’, then sure,” Ginny cut in, mock scowling. “How exactly was transfiguring yourselves awfully and jumping out from behind statues supposed to cheer me up?”

“Well, it’s like startling people out of the hiccups!” George insisted.

“Yeah,” Fred supported, “you just needed to be surprised into laughter!”

“Oh Merlin,” Sirius muttered, hand over his eyes. “You didn’t *really* think that would work, did you?”

“Hey!” the twins objected. “What would you know about it, *old fart?!* ”

Ginny sat up, alarmed, but her worries were for naught. Sirius seemed only playfully offended, and was more than capable of managing her brothers by himself.

“Oh, I think my time in the Marauders taught me enough,” he said casually, leaning back to watch his words take effect.

The change in the twins was dramatic, and while the shock and disbelief spread differently across their faces, Ginny snuck out, muffling her laughter into her hands. She pulled the door shut behind her, almost running straight into Hermione.

“Gin? I heard some odd noises from the twins’ room, couldn’t get back to sleep. What’s going on in the-”

“You do *not* want to go in there right now. Fred and George just found out that Sirius was part of the Marauders, and once they get over the shock I expect fireworks,” Ginny said urgently.

Hermione’s eyes widened in understanding, and the two girls snuck back up to their room. They closed the door just as Fred and George burst into for-once conflicting, overlapping noise.

“Hey,” Hermione asked suspiciously, “how’d *you* know that Sirius was one of the Marauders?”

“Well it’s not like it wasn’t fairly obvious,” Ginny retorted. “I’ve seen the map, the twins showed me years ago, and half the time Professor Lupin calls him Pads, especially when he looks like Snuffles. Everyone knows Lupin is a werewolf, so it seems to me that Moony would be a pretty good nickname for him, don’t you think?”

Hanging On To Parts Of Me

Chapter Summary

Harry arrives at Grimmauld, the nightmare club expands, the hearing goes as expected, Mad-Eye Moody is morbid, Hogwarts is a disappointment, Fred is hopeless, The Plan is briefly mentioned, and Horcruxes are discussed.

Chapter Notes

Look let's be honest a school full of angry teenagers isn't going to resist the urge to, uh, alter Umbridge's name. So warning for use of the word b*tch.

Playlist for this story is on my 8tracks. http://8tracks.com/handwrittenheart/in-the-shadow-of-a-damaged-heart#smart_id=dj:17606682

Timeline from here on out should roughly line up with OotP chapters, but I've been playing a bit fast and loose with the summer. But it technically works because there's roughly a month and a half between books four and five, which is when the first two chapters are set, and then this chapter we start on book canon at the beginning of August and continue into the first week of September.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Not a week after her conversation with Sirius and the twins, the convict was down in the dumps again. Like usual, there was a good reason for it--and like usual, it was a problem he could do nothing about.

Trust Harry to find what must be the one Dementor in that whole Muggle town, Ginny thought. If she focused on her exasperation, she could ignore the worry taking root in her chest. Worry about *why*, exactly, Dementors were in a Muggle town, right where Harry was; worry about him stuck in with those horrid Muggles; worry about him doing something stupid before the Order got him out of there (Ginny had seen Hermione and Ron's hands after Harry's letters arrived, and she had been relegated to feeding Hedwig, as the person not in danger of being pecked to death by an irate owl); worry about this... this *hearing* Dumbledore insisted the Ministry allow Harry.

Upon discovering the news, Hermione had immediately surrounded herself with books and quickly proclaimed that "of *course* they couldn't expel Harry, the law clearly allows for the use of underage magic in cases of self defense!"

This would doubtless be more reassuring if Ginny didn't have a subscription to the *Daily Prophet*. The Ministry had successfully turned Harry into a bad, overdone joke, and

precedent or no, justice didn't seem likely.

While the adults were clearly in fits over Harry's fate, they were doing their best to conceal it from Hermione and the younger Weasleys. They were not, in Ginny's opinion, doing a very good job.

"Don't worry your little heads about it," Mrs. Weasley had said soothingly, her eyes bright with worry herself. Between this and Percy, Ginny could see her mother was at her wits' end. "Dumbledore will sort this right out, you'll see!"

She had then rather obviously and deliberately ignored the bitter, concerned muttering Hermione and Ron immediately began.

The days after the Dementor incident were tense all throughout Grimmauld place, and the previously subtle fights between Sirius and Mrs. Weasley had become blatant and harsh. Dinner was held that first night in cold silence, tiptoeing around forbidden subjects--until Ron demanded an update on Harry and Sirius tried to give him one. Her mum had blasted him down loudly and forcefully, the beginning of yet another blazing row.

By the time Harry himself arrived late a few days later, during an Order meeting, Ginny was unsurprised to find him as frustrated and tense as them. In fact, he was even more so, and Ginny only discovered he had arrived by the sound of his voice yelling harshly at Hermione and Ron. While Ginny couldn't blame Harry for his anger, she found herself remembering Mad-Eye Moody's long lecture on the topic of security, and how fallible their defensive measures were. And a small, guilty part of her found herself considering Snape's words in an Order meeting he wasn't yet aware she had eavesdropped on; that Harry's connection to Voldemort could indeed be two-way. Perhaps Harry was right, and Dumbledore's silence *was* a matter of trust--not in Harry, but in Tom finding a way to use anything to his advantage.

Though still a bit flustered in Harry's presence, Ginny had, with Hermione's encouragement, been working on her ability to talk in front of him (without blushing, stuttering, or otherwise making a fool of herself, that is). She was pleased to note it seemed to be working, but unhappily delivered the news to the twins that the defenses placed on the Order meeting would (for once) succeed in keeping them out. It was going fine until Harry asked about Percy, and then Ginny stopped worrying about Harry's presence at all in her anger.

When her mum came up to inform them the Order meeting was over Ginny lied unflinchingly about the Dungbombs by the kitchen door, and then left to wash her hands before her mum thought too hard about *why*, exactly, her hands would be so disgusting.

Dinner, despite Fred and George's magical mishap with the flatware, went fairly well, and it was only post dessert that it took a turn for the worst. Sirius offered the information the teenagers had been seeking for weeks, and thus began another great fight with Mrs. Weasley. It was only by the intervention of Mr. Weasley and Lupin that it avoided violence--though they hadn't prevented any of the low blows Mrs. Weasley used about Azkaban and James Potter.

In the end, her mum was overruled, and Hermione and her siblings even won the right to stay and hear Sirius' explanation--while Ginny was sent up to bed like a child, the only one

forbidden from participating. Comforted by Hermione's silent promise to tell her about it that night, and the knowledge that she likely knew the information already (thanks to the Extendable Ears and Snape's grudging reports during her lessons), Ginny nonetheless raged her offense all the way up the stairs. For one thing, there was always the chance it would work; and for another, it wouldn't do to go too quietly. Her mum would be suspicious, to say nothing of Sirius and the twins.

Hermione did tell Ginny everything, but the buzz of a bit of new information soon faded into the monotony of household warfare. With Harry present, her mum seemed to believe summer was at its end--and thus her children's free labor was about to run out. Mrs. Weasley had redoubled her efforts to clean the house, and under her direction the drawing room and another two bedrooms were quickly cleared out (though not without a few magical thefts from Fred and George).

A few days passed, and Harry's hearing did swing in his favor, but it was not without drama. From the last-minute time change, to the presence of the full court, to the suspicious appearance of Lucius Malfoy (whose name *still* gave Ginny chills), nothing went as expected. Still, without that black cloud hanging over his head, Harry seemed in higher spirits--as did everyone but perhaps Sirius, who despite his well-wishes was not looking forward to the return to loneliness the teenagers' departure represented.

The nightmares she had for the past few weeks staved off with physical and mental exhaustion returned then, worse than ever. They were a twisted combination of horrible events: the Chamber and Riddle's memories; the rage in her father's voice as Percy stormed out of the house, vowing not to come back; Lucius Malfoy towering over Ginny's first-year self, handing her the worst experience of her life with a malicious smile twisting his pale face; the black cloud of the Dementors haunting the castle, dragging her down into depression as she read all she could find on Tom Riddle and Lord Voldemort; and Harry, bloody and exhausted, collapsed on the ground at the end of the Tournament with a dead body and a trophy. Elements of one would merge with another, until Ginny was as confused as she was terrified.

And Ginny was not the only one caught up in dark thoughts. Hermione began joining Ginny and Sirius' early-morning gatherings in the kitchen, and before long Harry was following the girls down the stairs, shadows in his eyes. Ron, who slept like a log, seemed undisturbed by the terrified muttering Ginny heard from out in the hall those few times Harry slept through the night. Sometimes the twins would come down too, though they were more often still awake than just woken up.

None of them questioned when Ginny went off to her lessons with Snape, though as the start of term grew nearer they had become less and less frequent. Hermione, she suspected, had informed Harry of the lie Snape and Dumbledore had spread; that Ginny was helping him sort suspicious objects he had found in Regulus' room. Sirius, when asked, repeated only that Dumbledore had asked his permission and been granted it (and that while he pitied Ginny, the less conversation about "that slimy git" the better).

Depending on the moods of those present, sometimes the nightmare gathering would sit, just staring into their tea or thin air--but sometimes distractions were preferred. On those nights

they would talk quietly, read books, turn the radio on softly to silence their thoughts.

Sirius could perhaps be convinced to trade a story for a story, and for each tale one of the teenagers told the room (usually about Harry's adventures or the twins' pranks), he would tell one about the Marauders, or Harry's mum. He avoided any mention of Wormtail, but in many cases it didn't seem hard; as if Peter Pettigrew had existed only on the periphery of the Marauders' grand and exciting lives.

If Ginny didn't know what Harry saw around Dementors, she might almost feel sorry for him. But she did, and she didn't.

The gatherings were so casual that Ginny never realized that she was becoming more and more comfortable in Harry's presence--even reaching the point where she could speak to him exactly as she spoke to Hermione and her brothers.

Between the worry still eclipsing her thoughts (Snape had informed her that week that Hagrid was running late, and they hadn't heard from him in some time) and the cleaning, Ginny only remembered how close it was to the start of term when the booklists arrived on the very last day of August, and a whole new kind of drama began--that is, the grand celebration over Hermione and Ron's prefect badges.

Fred and George, while good sports, were a bit offended at their mum discounting them because they didn't get prefect badges.

"Nevermind that only one of us would've been able to be a prefect at a time," Fred muttered.

"We just didn't want them," George insisted quietly.

Harry, Ginny could tell, was a bit sullen over not being chosen, and Ron was upset because everyone assumed Harry *would* be chosen, and Hermione felt guilty for being the one to say so aloud.

It was a grand mess Ginny was glad to be exempt from participating in, but she was not spared completely. Though she hadn't shared the news with her family, Ginny's booklist and term reminder had come with an extra envelope as well--a letter from Dumbledore himself.

Ms. Weasley,

While your first week of the term will doubtless be rather chaotic, I would appreciate meeting with you on the first Saturday, at one o'clock. I wish to discuss both your role in current events, and the information you mentioned during our last meeting. The password to enter my office will be Licorice Wands,

Professor Dumbledore

The real drama of the day, though, came towards the end of the celebration, when Mad-Eye Moody decided it was a laugh to show around a picture of the original Order of the Phoenix and list, loudly and casually to Harry's face, the terrible fates that each person had met. Unsurprisingly, Ginny had watched Harry flee up the stairs, his face stricken at what she later

surmised was the sight of his parents sitting on either side of Wormtail--the man who had brought about their deaths, one they died considering a trusted friend.

Everyone who saw it was rattled after that, and Ginny went to bed thinking sadly of Percy--of the terrible fates that could await the people in the room with her, as unknowingly doomed as those in the picture. Never expecting their end. Fighting to the last, giving everything they had to keep people safe, and *still* . Still failing. Still dying for a peace they would never see, a peace that turned out to be only a stopgap... a temporary reprieve.

Perhaps her thoughts were unknowingly influenced by the Boggart in the house, but that night Ginny dreamed not of the past but of a future. A shifting cast of her friends and family's dead bodies sprawled across the Great Hall of Hogwarts, narrated by Mad-Eye's gruff voice explaining how each horrible piece of dark magic ended their lives.

Time switched abruptly from slow motion to superspeed. The nightmare had held her in its grip all night, but before Ginny knew it she was being knocked down the stairs by the twins' flying luggage.

Lupin ended up being the one to patch her up, because her mum was too busy shouting at them. Sirius, torn between laughter and concern, had roped Tonks into helping him contain the portrait of his mother, who was trying to challenge Mrs. Weasley for volume. Mrs. Black was winning simply because, lacking lungs, she had little need to pause for breath, and they soon gave up. Every little sound set her off again, and clearly no peace would be had until the party set off.

To top it all off, they were nearly late to the train because one of the Order members assigned to guard duty hadn't shown up, and Moody had insisted on trying to wait for him. Eventually, even Mad-Eye had given up on Podmore, grunting in frustration, and in the chaos of leaving Ginny saw Sirius slip out the door in his Animagus form to meet Tonks with Harry and her mum. Laughing with the twins, Ginny followed Lupin and a witch she vaguely recognized from a few Order meetings she'd eavesdropped on.

Eventually, despite the circuitous routes, they all ended up on the platform, waving goodbye.

Deserted by Ron and Hermione for their prefect duties, Harry wandered the train with Ginny until they found Neville and she tugged them both in to sit with Loony Lovegood. While a bit odd, the girl was nice, and so prone to spouting nonsense that anything she repeated of their conversations (true or not) would never be believed.

If Ginny had known the plant was going to explode, though, perhaps she wouldn't have decided sit with Neville.

Like Luna, he was both odd and kind, and almost as ostracized. The one thing he seemed to be truly *good* at was Herbology, and as he unwittingly demonstrated, that obsession was a double-edged sword unlikely to make him any more popular. Still, Neville was loyal, and--despite what he believed--very brave. He'd been wonderful company at the Yule Ball last year, nice enough to take Ginny since third-years couldn't get in on their own, and she felt a prickle of shame for thinking ill of him.

Hermione and Ron soon arrived at their compartment, though, and the trip was spiced up even more by the unexpected presence of Draco Malfoy and his sharp hints about recognizing Sirius on the Platform (hints that, Ginny thought exasperatedly, clearly went completely over Ron's head, despite knowing all the facts).

The opening feast was, even after all that, the worst part of the day, hands down. It beat being knocked down the stairs and crushing her ribs, and the pain of repairing them. It beat the eardrum bursting noise of Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Black both going full bore at the same time, and the worry of almost missing the train. It was *even* worse than being squirted in the eyes with the stinking pus of Neville's plant, and the weight in her chest growing larger with worry for Sirius.

Not only was Hagrid conspicuously missing, but the Sorting Hat was concerningly blunt about coming danger and the need for house unity, and Ginny had never before met anyone willing to casually interrupt Dumbledore, especially at his *own feast*. The Umbridge woman epitomized the word 'toady', both in appearance and her apparent love affair with the Ministry of Magic. Her speech was shrill and boring, but Ginny sat straight up and focused the whole time, exchanging dark looks with Hermione, who was seated halfway down the Gryffindor table.

So this was the 'Ministry interference' Snape and Dumbledore had been discussing all those weeks ago, hmm? Ginny was decidedly unimpressed.

Lessons with Umbridge (who soon became known among the students as 'Umbitch') were as awful as Ginny had feared. While she didn't have her until the second day, the fifth year Gryffindors had her straight off, and the day had hardly started before rumors began to fly of Harry's proclamation and resultant detention. More concerning to Ginny was Hermione's rebellion. Harry might have a hot head recently, but Hermione wouldn't have started trouble if she wasn't truly enraged.

When she had experienced a 'lesson' with Umbridge herself, Ginny completely agreed. If she didn't have spy duties to worry about, Ginny would have landed herself in detention right next to Harry. Curbing her tongue was one of the hardest things she'd ever done, but unlike Harry at least she didn't have to worry about cruel personal taunts dropped in class by the teacher. Not, at least, until she had Potions on Wednesday.

Snape was as cruel as ever, and held her back after that first class to give her a detention slip to be served the next night (for 'insolence'). It was a good excuse for their meeting, but not one Ginny hoped they'd be using often. Eventually someone would mention her frequent detentions to her mother, even without the official notice Mrs. Weasley would get for a real detention, and chaos would ensue.

Watching the fifth years be buried under work was amusing at first, but it (and her late-night elf knitting) made Hermione's temper as short as only exam week usually could. She took this frustration out on the twins--who in some cases did deserve it--and it was only made worse when Fred made the mistake of trying to flirt his way out of a corner. Far from being flattered, Hermione was furious, and her hair seemed to puff up larger like an offended cat's. She seemed to view it as an especially cruel kind of mocking, a level the twins had never

before stooped to--and poor Fred was too embarrassed to tell her the truth. The yelling went on so long that Ginny was tempted to tell her *for* him, just to make it end.

Ginny thought that would turn him off it, but to George's great exasperation, he seemed truly unable to control his tongue sometimes. By the weekend Hermione seemed to have elected to ignore it completely.

Meanwhile, Ginny's grand plan had started, smoothly if a little slowly. Arithmancy, one of the few classes where Ginny's performance was unhelpt by having refocused her magical core, soon became a balancing act of paying enough attention to pass, and engaging the holier-than-thou Isobel MacDougal enough to become friends. Ginny had to get *her* to make the first real move, or it would be too suspicious.

And so by the end of the first week, the worry Ginny had expected to subside had grown even more, and she was glad to celebrate Ron's acceptance on to the house Quidditch team, relaxing at last.

While she'd heard that Harry had been in detention with The Toad all week, she hadn't seen him much at meals, and her own afternoons were occupied with spell practice and, on Thursday, her first meeting of the term with Snape. Ginny had made no progress with Isobel (plus in the chaos of the first week her Occlumency shields had weakened) and he had been especially brutal in his attacks. She came out of it with a headache that lasted from Thursday night all throughout Friday, which had included both double History of Magic and double Potions, the worst Friday schedule Ginny had ever had.

Hermione, she saw, was passed out in a corner at the common room celebration; Ron was with the team, stunned with happiness; the twins were surrounded by first years with suspiciously bloody noses, and-- *there* , Harry was coming into the common room. As she felt her cheeks warm up Ginny jerked her gaze away from him, only to lock eyes with George, a knowing look of sympathy on his face before he smiled and subtly nodded his head towards Fred. Fred, she saw, was watching Hermione wake up slowly out of the corner of his eye, and Ginny's breath caught in her throat at the look on his face; bewildered and longing and pained.

Empathy led Ginny to go steal both Fred's butterbeer and his attention, and she spent the rest of the evening laughing as her brothers explained, and in several cases demonstrated, their newest products for her. Despite it being their N.E.W.T. year neither twin seemed much concerned with their homework or grades, and instead appeared to spend every waking minute on their joke shop ideas.

Before bed Ginny made a strong effort to build back her Occlumency shields, determined not to become easy prey for Snape once more. If she dreamed that night, she never remembered it.

The next day was Saturday, and Ginny got an early flight around the school grounds in before breakfast, after which she camped out with a few friends in the common room doing homework. Unfortunately, she got little work done, too busy watching the clock, anticipating her meeting with Dumbledore. Despite his scheduling it after lunch, Ginny only ate a few bites. They seemed to turn to chalk in her mouth, leaving her mouth dry and uncomfortable,

and they sat heavily in her stomach as she wound her way through the corridors, taking an unplanned alternate route to avoid Peeves.

True to the letter, the gargoyles outside Dumbledore's office leapt aside when Ginny told them the candy-themed password, and as she climbed the spiral staircase she lifted her chin and calmed her breathing. When she pushed open the office door into the wonderland of strange gadgets, her gaze was cool, her face pale but still--right up until she caught sight of an old picture of Tom at Hogwarts, sitting abandoned on the edge of one of the many tables.

Her chest grew tight, and it was on unsteady feet that Ginny stumbled the rest of the way in, feeling rather like a paper swept away into a hurricane. Dumbledore had looked up sharply as she entered, and as he connected the dots the pity in his eyes sent a spark through Ginny's spine, inspiring her to draw up firm again with a scowl.

"I am sorry, Ginevra, that must have been a rather nasty surprise," Professor Dumbledore said gently, standing to gather the picture into a pile with a great many other papers that had been spread across his desk--nearly all of which, Ginny saw from her brief glance, concerned Tom Riddle. "Please, have a seat."

"It's alright," Ginny replied, the lie tasting bitter on her tongue. She took a seat opposite his own, her knees so stiff it took a second for them to unlock and let her sit. "I knew what I came here to discuss; it really shouldn't have been such a shock."

"Still," Dumbledore said, "it was inconsiderate of me. You deal so well with the events of your first year that it is easy to forget they happened at all, but that is no excuse for my doing so."

"I guess it would be easy for others to forget, Professor, but *I've* never had that problem. Is this all you wanted to talk to me about?" she bit out through a clenched jaw. If her hands weren't shaking, perhaps Ginny would have curbed her tongue. Doubtless, she would regret her sharp words later.

"No," Dumbledore said, sitting back in his chair. "What I wished to discuss was your comments to Professor Snape and I this summer; about Tom Riddle, former Professor Slughorn, and Lord Voldemort. You said you knew what the diary was, what he had 'used Myrtle's death for', if I remember correctly. What, exactly, do you know of these things? And how?"

Ginny breathed out through her nose, gathering her thoughts. She had expected this conversation for weeks, but every draft in her mind had seemed... lecturing. Odd. Incomplete. Still, no place to start but the beginning.

"You have to understand that at first, I remembered nothing. While *he* was in control, I had no knowledge of what I was doing. But later... especially after the diary was destroyed, it started coming back. Eventually I realized that I had been present, I had been *aware* of what I was doing while I did it. It was still *me*. Still my body, still my wand. I think Tom even enjoyed it that way, that I was stuck in there watching it all happen. So he controlled my body and left my mind awake, and then he'd take my memories and bury them so deep I couldn't reach them."

Dumbledore's poker face was probably excellent, but he let her see the sympathy in his bright eyes as he folded his hands together on the desk and frowned.

"That summer, I started remembering more and more of what I'd done. And not just what *I'd* done, but things he had done. His past, his thoughts, his memories. I remembered things I hadn't been present for, things he had never told me. In the Chamber, he told Harry that... the more of my soul I poured into his diary, the more of his soul he could pour into me. I guess that was a bit more two-way than he'd intended, and I had started dreaming his dreams, thinking his thoughts... as if I was a walking extension of him. He took those memories from me like the rest, but he wasn't powerful enough to completely erase them the way he wanted to, so he buried those as well. When the others came back, so did they."

"So you remember Tom Riddle's past, his childhood, as if it were your own?" Dumbledore asked, horror and intrigue competing in his face. This was clearly not what he had expected.

"Not all of it, no, but enough. *More* than enough. He was good at being charming but he was... *horrible*, even as a child. Something was *wrong* in him, Professor," Ginny explained, her voice thick with disgust. "He never cared about anyone else, not ever, not really. He did terrible things to the other children in the orphanage with his magic. He had such power, even then...and such ruthless control over it. He kept trophies, things he'd stolen from them. Mementos of the pain and terror he caused to... to *amuse* himself."

"Yes," Dumbledore said softly. "It was his pride in his ability to control others with his magic, and that unusually high level of control of wandless magic that first drew my attention the day we met. He told me much that he later regretted, unsure what was normal for wizards and trying to impress me... or scare me, if he could. He never let me catch so much as a glimpse of his true nature once he began his lessons, but I never forgot what I had seen that day, when no careful charm had been present in his face."

"It was the charm that drew me in," she admitted. "The same as everyone else. I wasn't stupid, y'know. I did double-check that my diary was who he said he was. But Tom said all the right things, and he was in the Hogwarts records, he *was* Head Boy. And he seemed so helpful, so kind when everything was so unfamiliar. By the time I realized anything was wrong it was too late." Ginny rubbed her face briskly, and fixed her attention on one of the whirling objects on the far side of the room.

This wasn't a conversation she could have with prolonged eye contact. She would go mad. Or start crying. She wasn't honestly sure which was worse.

"As I told your parents that year, Ginevra, you are not the first person to fall victim to either side of Tom, the monster at the core or the man on the surface. Many old, wiser, and more wary than yourself have done much worse under his influence. If you can, please continue. What was the diary? What do you know of Horace Slughorn?"

"You know as well as I do that the diary was a Horcrux, Professor Dumbledore. He had found the idea in the school library, searching for ways to make himself immortal. Tom was afraid of death, so afraid. It was a weakness in his eyes, and that's why he thought for so long that his mother couldn't have been a witch. She had died, and if she had had magic then she couldn't *possibly* have died so easily. So normally. For a long time he was disappointed. He

found only ways to prolong his life, only things that would make him dependent, weak. But finally, in the Restricted Section, he found a book on Horcruxes. It seemed his search had paid off at last. For the low cost of murder, he could have the immortality he had sought. Tom had only one question, and for that he went to Professor Slughorn.”

Ginny paused to swallow, her throat dry and yet it felt clogged and sticky. She moved on from the oxymoronic thought, her brown eyes shadowed and dark even in the bright shimmery light of the magic-filled room. Her trembling had stopped, even her unsteady hands, and she sat instead in unnatural stillness. When she spoke again, it was in a whisper, the words too horrible to be repeated, and she looked up at the Headmaster, locking eyes with him.

“How many Horcruxes could he make? How far could the human soul be pushed?”

Dumbledore was silent for a long time. He was torn. Here, at last, were the answers he had sought for decades, some to questions he had only in the past few years asked. And yet, they came from the deadened eyes of a student he had failed to protect. So should he feel excited, elated? Or bitter and disappointed? The odd mix sat stiffly in his chest as he gathered his thoughts. Eventually, the anticipation got the better of him.

“How many, Ginevra? How many did he make?”

From the distance on her face and the eery hunger in her voice, a voice more true to his memory of Tom than he had ever expected to hear, Dumbledore guessed she quoted the original conversation directly. “Would one Horcrux be much use? Can you only split your soul once? Wouldn’t it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces, I mean, for instance, isn’t *seven* the most powerful magical number...?”

“Seven,” Dumbledore breathed. “Yes, that fits with what I have discovered, what I have speculated. Thank you, Ginevra. I have asked enough of you today, I think-” the Headmaster started, peering concernedly at her through his glasses.

“You’re hunting them, aren’t you, Professor? You’re trying to find the things he made into Horcruxes and where he hid them, so you can destroy him,” Ginny demanded, her voice her own again. The stillness that had bound her had broken, but for once her shaking did not begin anew.

“...Yes,” Dumbledore answered, his hesitation clear.

“I want to help.”

“You have helped enough. You pressed me into allowing you to join the Order, and against what one might call ‘better judgement’ I agreed, but you are fourteen, a minor far from the age of majority. I allow you to spy because, within Hogwarts, the danger is relatively little, but the search for the Horcruxes will by definition take me out of safety and straight into the most hazardous traps Voldemort could imagine.”

“So you won’t take me with you to find them, fine, but that’s not the only way I can help with this. If you show me what you know, I can help you discover the locations, at the very least.

I'm not saying I'd be *happy* being left behind, but..." Ginny pleaded.

"It is true that you have a unique insight into the places and things Tom was likely to use..."

"I can handle this. More importantly, I can help."

"Very well," Dumbledore said heavily. "But I meant what I said, Ms. Weasley. I have asked enough of you today. For now, focus on the task you originally convinced me to let you undertake. Meet with Professor Snape, Ginny. Attend your classes, talk to Ms. MacDougal. I will send you a note when I wish to meet with you again, and we can, ah, 'compare notes' on Tom."

"But-!"

"No, Ginevra. On this I am firm. We will discuss this no further today."

With that, he turned his attention firmly to his papers, and with a sigh Ginny left, shaking her head.

Chapter End Notes

In my mind this is when Dumbledore is finding out a lot of what he taught Harry about Tom Riddle in sixth year. Not all of it, because he's been hunting for this info for years, but he's been clearing it out and going over it again now that the existence (and location) of Voldie's Horcruxes is more pressing, and making connections he hadn't before. So we're merging fifth and sixth year a fair bit from here on out.

I don't go into a lot of detail with canon book scenes because, at this point, we're still mostly synched up with canon and the changes are minimal. And OotP is a long-ass book so what I don't have to recreate, I won't? Basically. But I mention the canon scenes rather frequently in this chapter.

I swear there's something else I meant to mention in the notes and I totally forgot what it was. It'll come to me.

Love Taught Me To Lie

Chapter Summary

Letters are sent, progress is made, and the Inquisition begins.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who reviewed! Life got busy for a while, so while this has been mostly written since before chapter 3 even came out, I didn't have time to finish and edit it until recently, but the lovely comments really motivated me to get chapter 4 up.

Did you know that there are only three canon characters in Ginny's year at Hogwarts? Trust me, I looked. Hard. Her, Luna, and Colin Creevey. But pretty much everyone I include has been mentioned in the books, as just a random single name one off or something. I just took that and ran with it.

Slight hints of Ginny/Neville, not endgame ship. OotP is kind of the book where Ginny gets into the dating game and figures herself out, y'know? So if you're not into it, don't freak out.

I deviated from my title theme. This one comes from Cannonball by Damien Rice.

Also I wasn't completely unproductive between chapters, I wrote and put up a HP oneshot! So if you like Lily Evans and/or ghosts you should go read that. Shameless self-promotion.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ginny spent her Sunday morning writing letters to send by the school owls, and ended up sending one to her parents, one to Tonks, and--prompted by the article about him in the *Prophet* the day before--the final one to Sirius. The last one was the longest and the most complicated, since she wrote it as if it was going to her brother instead of its actual recipient.

Dear Bill,

It's been a busy first week back at school. Fourth year classes are harder than I expected, and I'm a bit distracted by everything going on. I hope all is well at home. How's Mum and Dad? And your dog, Snuffles? I miss him already.

The train ride was pretty eventful. I sat with my friend Luna Lovegood, her father is the editor of The Quibbler. I loved last month's issue, have you seen it yet? It was lovely getting

back to doing magic, up until that git Malfoy interrupted us to annoy Ron and Hermione. Of course that bullying slimeball would get the Prefect badge, huh? But he mentioned seeing Snuffles with Harry on the Platform, seemed to know he was yours (which reminded me to write you, so I suppose it was alright).

Neville Longbottom was sitting with us too, and he had this plant he was really excited about--a Mimulus Mimbletonia, I think? I'm probably spelling it wrong. Well, anyways, he was trying to show us its defense mechanisms, so he poked it with a quill and it exploded this stinky goo all over the compartment. Harry was covered in it, and of course that's when his crush, a Ravenclaw girl named Cho, stopped by--just as he was wiping Stinksap off his glasses. It was hilarious, I'm just glad the twins weren't there to see it.

By the way, I saw that the Prophet ran an article about that mass murderer, Black, being in London. I know you haven't been back there long, you only just moved your job, but do be careful, Bill? I'm sure Mum will already have reamed you out, and I sympathize completely, but if us 'kids' have to keep cool heads and stay safe then so do you.

I still haven't heard from Percy. Don't tell our parents I mentioned him, they'd have fits, but I miss him. As awful as everything with him is, well, I'm a bit proud. He's being an utter git and he's wrong, of course, but he's got conviction. He's willing to stand up to anybody, including Mum and Dad, for what he believes in. Better than caving under pressure, I suppose, but I hope he comes to his senses soon and pays attention to the facts.

The Sorting Hat's song reminded me of him a bit, too. It was oddly doom-and-gloom, spouted off a warning about friendship and inter-House unity and not letting our differences divide us, but I don't think it did much good.

As I'm sure you've heard by now, we have yet another new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher; Professor Umbridge. She's bringing everyone back to basics, so all students do in her class is read the theory, chapter by chapter. Of course Hermione is bored, she already read the whole book!

Umbridge is a real fan of the Ministry, I hear she still works for Fudge, and she and Harry have been having a lot of philosophical differences. Said differences seem to be resulting in a lot of detentions, so I hope he cools off soon, or he'll miss so many Quidditch practices Angelina--the Captain this year--will have no choice but to yank him from the team.

Fred and George haven't done a great job of getting on her good side, either, but they don't seem too bothered what any of the teachers think this year. They're much more focused on their 'market research' than their grades, I swear they're only staying for seventh year so Mum doesn't go spare. But some of their inventions are really genius, and they got funding from somewhere, so I think they can actually do it. Don't tell Mum I said that, either!

Well, I've got to go, it's Sunday and I still have a bunch of homework to get done. I meant to do it yesterday, but it was the first weekend back and Ron had just made the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Can't blame me for being a bit distracted, can you?

Love, Ginny

She looked the letter over one more time: trying to see anything a normal student wouldn't mention; anything a letter thief might not know already; anything that would be odd to tell Bill. Unable to find anything too outrageous, she whispered the real recipient to the large school barn owl, hoped for the best and sent it out the window.

She'd have to hope it went to Sirius and not her brother, but even that wouldn't be a travesty. He might guess it was really for Sirius when he saw the bit about Snuffles, and if not there was nothing in there he couldn't see.

The afternoon Ginny spent finishing up her weekend homework, thankful she wasn't yet a fifth year and buried in piles of work. By the evening she was curled up by the fire talking to Hermione and reading her latest book about magical manipulation, disguised in the binding of a book on the Weird Sisters. Hermione was magically knitting more elf hats, her homework long done without detention or Quidditch to distract her.

The girls talked quietly about the article on Sturgis Podmore and his Azkaban sentence, at fair volume about the disaster that was the Gryffindor Quidditch team's first practice (Ginny had the whole story from the twins right after they got back, and was happy to tell Hermione the details her friends had refused her), and loudly about how ridiculous Umbridge's insistence on magic-free classes was, especially for the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. classes. During the last, they were treated to some awkward looks of agreement by the students around them that overheard (Dean Thomas nodded his tired agreement, and Seamus Finnigan stormed up the dormitory stairs, glaring at Harry the whole way).

Eventually, Hermione left to go see how Harry and Ron were getting on with their last-minute essays, and Ginny excused herself up to bed.

Her roommates were either long asleep or still working on homework, and she had the bathroom to herself to wash up and change. For a moment Ginny stared into the mirror above the sink in disbelief. There was no way that face was hers.

When had her baby fat disappeared? When had her cheeks and eyes hollowed, her wrists become so thin? When, Ginny wondered, pulling at the bags under her eyes, her face barely centimeters away from the surface of the mirror, had her freckles gotten lighter? Her eyes and hair darker?

Ginny spread thin fingers, and, remembering Tom's skeletal hands, shuddered. Ginny resolved to eat more than usual tomorrow. And not to sit next to Ron, whose table manners put many off eating completely. This couldn't be good for her. She looked fragile, and she wanted to feel strong.

If Ginny had expected the second week of Hogwarts to be back to normal, it was anything but. The second Monday of the term was as crazy as the first had been, but good luck was mixed in with the bad.

She had sat with Neville for breakfast instead of Hermione and the boys, determined to shovel in food--only to lose her appetite to the latest copy of the *Daily Prophet*, where her own brother announced some of the worst news possible.

She made an odd, strangled hissing noise, and soon Neville was reading over her shoulder. Ginny had to read the article twice to fully grasp the details past her anger.

"Umbridge," Neville said hollowly. "In charge of supervising the other teaches. Oh, they won't be able to teach us *anything* now."

"Forget that! What if she fires one of them, or something? And then we get stuck with *another* Ministry spy, thanks to--what was it--Educational Decree Twenty-Two. The one that brought *her* here," Ginny replied bitterly. "I can't believe Percy. There's nothing 'successful' about what she's done so far!"

"I know," Neville agreed, looking an odd mix of angry and nauseous. While the set of his jaw was rather attractive, the strange purple his face was turning was extremely off-putting. *Wait, attractive?* "Plus look at how this whole article is written! They've put such a spin on it, from your brother to Mr. Malfoy--who cares if he lives in a mansion, anyways--to that nod to the opposing argument leading straight into an 'alleged' wrongdoing to discredit the other side. Everything is set up to make this High Inquisitor business seem like a *good* thing. This is pathetic."

"I didn't know you were into writing, Nev," Ginny said curiously. She deliberately pushed away all thoughts of his jawline. Neville was, at this point, her best friend. Messing that up was a recipe for disaster.

"Well," he said sheepishly, "you know how a lot of my practical magic doesn't go so well? A lot of teachers will let you write extra credit essays to make up points, so I do as many of those as I can. And even with Snape, his essays are pretty easy because they don't involve steaming cauldrons and him glaring down his beak at me."

Ginny was startled into laughter, but before she recovered a glance at the clock had the two Gryffindors scurrying in opposite directions; Neville to join the other fifth years at their table heading for History of Magic, and Ginny to the greenhouses for double Herbology.

Herbology meant the Ravenclaw fourth years--including Isobel MacDougal. After the fiasco that was Ginny's first year, she had few friends, and none willing to be her partner. Mostly Ginny worked with Loony Lovegood (who nobody else wanted to work with, either).

The project for the day was working in teams of three, and though Luna headed for Ginny in the hubbub, Professor Sprout brought that to a halt with assigned partners.

Ginny crossed the fingers of her wand hand under her desk until--relief bloomed in her chest--Sprout called her name alongside not Luna's but Isobel's. Their third was an intimidating Ravenclaw boy she'd seen in several classes but never talked to. They were already sitting together, so Ginny moved to join them as the third person at their table left.

Looking around the crowded greenhouse, she saw the groups were split so none were all from one House, though of course groups of three couldn't be evenly mixed. Colin Creevey and one of Ginny's roommates, Olivia Blunt, were sitting with a Ravenclaw boy Ginny vaguely thought had an older sibling in Hufflepuff, and so on. Ravenclaw, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor. Gryffindor, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw.

The Ravenclaw boy working with her and Isobel introduced himself as Grant Page, and he was familiar because he was also in Arithmancy with them. He was very tall, and broad, with close cropped hair and large hands. Grant's skin was a warm brown, and his eyes were a startling contrast against his otherwise dark coloring; a bright grey-blue. The combination sort of reminded her of Harry, actually. Apparently Ginny had a thing for dark skin and jewel-bright eyes.

Excluding Neville, thought Ginny grudgingly.

Ginny shook herself before she stared too long, but she didn't miss the way he kept glancing at her hair before she twisted it up into a ponytail. Even then, his gaze just transferred to her neck and face. She wasn't the only one who liked what they saw.

Arithmancy the two Ravenclaws excelled at--Herbology, not so much. Isobel didn't want to get her hands dirty, especially if there was someone she could get to do it for her, and Grant had the worst black thumb Ginny had ever seen. He was perfectly willing to be helpful, quiet though he was, but he was clueless when it came to plants. Ginny, who studied regularly with Neville, soon took over.

Isobel's initial resentment at being ordered around faded as she discovered Ginny did know what she was doing, and soon the two were asking questions and helping her deadhead the poisonous flowering trees with little hesitation.

Conversation was pleasant and practical. Finishing far sooner than the rest of the class, the three ended up sitting and discussing the weekend's Arithmancy homework, to be turned in later that day. Ginny was pleasantly surprised when Grant tapped his wand on her hands and all the fertilizer, leaves----and worse, the poisonous pollen--that had collected on her fell off and drifted to the floor. Including, she was disgusted to see, some from her hair. Isobel he left to fend for herself, but the shorter girl didn't seem to mind, and she quickly took care of it with a tap of her wand.

Sprout pronounced their plant expertly tended and awarded their houses ten points for each of them--so despite Ginny doing most of the work, Ravenclaw ended up getting twice as many points as Gryffindor. She bit her lip and shrugged it off. She was just getting on their good side, and throwing a house points tantrum wouldn't do her any favors.

She smiled at them tightly as she grabbed her bag and hurried off to Transfiguration, which of course was halfway across the castle from the greenhouses.

During lunch Ginny managed to overhear the twins telling Hermione and the boys about their first inspected lesson, Charms. Relieved that at least Professor Flitwick had done well, Ginny headed off to double Arithmancy with a bit more spring in her step. Despite the the Umbridge news ruining breakfast, her day was going rather well.

Both Isobel and Grant had gotten there before her, and when Ginny sat down in her usual seat next to Isobel, Grant sat down on her other side.

It was a noticeable break in pattern, but she took it in stride. It wasn't assigned seating, the students could sit wherever they wanted. If a tall, beautiful boy wanted to sit next to her, Ginny wasn't going to complain. Especially, she thought guiltily, since Grant Page and his twin sister Harper were on the list of students Snape wanted her to look into.

The problems were more complicated than anything they'd done before, and several students groaned at the end when Professor Vector announced a test next Wednesday, giving them only two more classes to master the equations. Ginny left the class contemplating the problem sets they'd been assigned to hand back in in just two days and sighed. Once more, she nodded at Grant and Isobel as she left the classroom, and when the group of Ravenclaws and Slytherins they joined started muttering loudly and suspiciously behind her, Ginny slowed her pace just enough to eavesdrop.

"What were you two doing hanging around *her*?" one voice asked, sounding disgusted.

"Working," Isobel replied dryly. "She knows what she's talking about, most of the time."

"Yeah," another voice chimed in, "but she's also--"

"Also what?" Grant asked menacingly. Ginny fought hard not to react. She knew what was coming, what always came when people tried to be friends with her.

"She's also the Girl from the Chamber, Grant. I heard a rumor that she was the one attacking people, too, not just one of the victims."

"Even if that is true Astoria, shouldn't you be cheering her on, then? Other than a ghost and a cat, everyone else attacked was a Mudblood, and it's not like you care much for their lot," Isobel cut in.

"I don't care about them, I care about how the hell she was powerful enough to either Petrify people on her own, or, if Potter was actually telling the truth, control a fucking Basilisk. As a *first year*. I care about what happened to give Professor Lockhart a complete memory dump, and the fact that a blood traitor Gryff was going around calling herself the Heir of *Slytherin*," said the cold voice of Astoria Greengrass.

"The Weasleys are an old pureblood family, Astoria, and they haven't all been Gryffindors. They intermarried with the Blacks and the Prewetts and the rest of the major pureblood families, and there were certainly some Slytherins and Ravenclaws in those lots. Her friends, what few she has, are purebloods, too. Longbottom, as odd as he is, and sometimes she partners up with Loony Lovegood. Maybe she isn't a bloodtraitor like her family. Seems unlikely for her to be one if she really was Petrifying Muggleborns," Grant said quietly. It was, Ginny thought, the most words she'd ever heard him speak, even in class. She wondered if he was so silent because when he spoke he was so long-winded, then realized with a little shame that she had little room to criticize in that regard.

“Besides,” Isobel continued mock casually, “it turns out the over-abundance of Weasleys is good for something. I think she actually *could’ve* been powerful enough to Petrify people, y’know. Ginevra is a Seventh.”

“What?” the mystery voice asked in confusion.

“Wait, really?” said Grant.

“You’re *kidding*,” Greengrass sputtered in disbelief.

“Haven’t you ever *counted* them? I’m telling you, she’s a Seventh Child. Plus, she’s the first girl born into the family in over a hundred years. That’s got to give her magic a major power boost,” insisted Isobel. Ginny could tell she was smug to know something the others didn’t. Her voice was low and satisfied.

“So you really think a *Weasley* was Slytherin’s Heir?”

Ginny never knew how the conversation ended, because she came upon her turn, and missing it would draw too much attention.

On Tuesday, after another dull Defense Against the Dark Arts class, Ginny took a few pointless turns and headed up a staircase, until she found a satisfactorily unused hallway. It was occupied only by unbelievably bored portraits. There she stayed for about another hour, talking to the various paintings.

They didn’t see much traffic, and Filch rarely got round to cleaning them; so in exchange for a few Scourgify’s and her undivided attention, they were happy to tell her all about their subjects, their painters, and--most importantly--everything they knew about the goings on of the castle and its occupants.

One particularly lonely painting, a stodgy old Ministry wizard, regaled Ginny with the history of Blood Quills and their uses in contract signing--and, centuries ago, student punishment. The conclusion was how sure he was that “that new Professor, Um-something” was using them on students in her detentions, but none of the paintings could get in her rooms to check.

Several other paintings tried to one-up him by telling her about all the recent gossip: Trelawney’s horrid inspection; Hermione’s newest DADA rebellion; and Harry, back in detention with the Toad.

Ginny left the paintings with a promise to return soon, and headed to the library. There, she started an essay for Transfiguration on Animagi (rather helped by a summer with Sirius), and finished the problems for Arithmancy.

The next few days were filled with much the same. The next two teachers to be inspected by the Toad were McGonagall (whose inspection quickly became the stuff of legend) and

Grubbly-Plank, both during fifth year classes. On Wednesday, however, Ginny spent an hour in Arithmancy with Umbridge staring at her, an odd smile creeping over her squat face.

Wednesday's Arithmancy class was more notable to Ginny, however, by the fact that Isobel--with a very calculating look in her dark eyes--invited her to join her weekend study group for the test the following week.

"I mean, it's mostly Ravenclaws and Slytherins, but I have a feeling you'll fit *right* in, Ginevra."

"Sure," Ginny agreed, nonchalant in appearance if not in actuality. She didn't bother arguing with the Ravenclaw about her name; Isobel wasn't the sort of person who took well to being corrected, and Ginny needed the olive branch she was extending. "The more practice I get with these numerology charts before the test the better."

And she told herself that her decision to attend was influenced entirely by her work for the Order, and had nothing at all to do with the small smile Grant gave her when she agreed.

Chapter End Notes

I know that Astoria Greengrass is supposed to be a year below Ginny at Hogwarts but we're fudging that back, as I said above, I am desperate for some non ocs in her year. I also know that in canon, married to Draco, she regularly argues with the Malfoys about blood purity and stuff, but I see that as being kind of a post-War revelation thing. She doesn't really care, now, but she's not going to swim against the current for people she doesn't even know.

I'm not sure if the Blood Quill thing is canon or fanon at this point, but if it's fanon it probably came from Titansrule and their pretty awesome canon rewrite fanfictions. Epic fix-it fic, guys, go read it. They're on AO3, but I think the rewrite of book six??? is still in progress.

Chapter five is already partially written, so hopefully that'll be up by next week. I'm not sure, I'm leaving to visit my sister for a few days, so I'm don't know how much I'll get done this week.

Snake Eyes (This Cruelty of Youth)

Chapter Summary

In which Snape meets Tom.

Chapter Notes

I return! ...almost three years later. Anyway I just want to say that it means a lot that people left such nice reviews. Your requests were not in vain, I probably would've never come back to this if people hadn't asked for more. 80% of this was written back in 2016. I actually had two separate chapter fives partially done. One became this, the other became chapter six. So there's at least a little bit more guaranteed!

I really meant to keep writing this, but I started college, I developed a chronic illness, and I was working. But you guys reminded me it was here and at least some people were interested in it still. Thank you!

Chapter title is from Snake Eyes by Mumford and Sons

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Her second Occlumency lesson of the term started off better than the last, between her progress with Isobel and her renewed commitment to the mental practice, but Ginny's good luck streak came to an abrupt end during it just the same. In fact, it took a rather large turn for the worst.

"I've been working on the portraits, and they sa--" suddenly Snape had caught Ginny's eyes, and mid-sentence she was sucked into her head. He brushed it lightly at first, and she tried to keep talking as if nothing was amiss.

Her first few shields held strong, but a few unsorted thoughts had risen from the deepest levels, and Snape used those as footholds to go deeper than usual, into memories Ginny thought of only in her sleep. Only ever when she was weak. Private things, deadly things, crushes and romance and blood on her hands. The memory of Grant's smile quickly filled her head, but it twisted suddenly into the dark grin of Tom Riddle.

And with that, both she and Snape were trapped; held captive but his curiosity and her fear, until the hole in her soul sucked them in so deep they couldn't escape if they tried.

She was standing in the corridor where the last message had been written, diary in one hand and wand in the other. Blood ran down from a cut on her left arm, a perfect match to the

blood dripping down the wall. Flickering, in the corner of her eye, was a softly glowing white form she knew to be Tom.

At that point he was still visible only to her, and she had walked through the whole school from her dorm to write her final note with him beside her, no one the wiser. Every eye passed through him, every eye passed over her. No one cared what little Ginny Weasley did.

“HER SKELETON WILL LIE IN THE CHAMBER FOREVER.”

Slowly, one foot in front of the other, Ginny walked stiffly through the halls towards the first floor girl’s bathroom, which she knew would be occupied only by Moaning Myrtle. Tom glided beside her, anticipation in every line of his body, until they reached their destination.

He seemed... gentle, almost nostalgic, when he smiled brightly at the oblivious, tearful Myrtle. Unable to see him, she was trying to block Ginny’s way.

“My first. Isn’t she lovely?” Tom said softly, stroking an invisible hand over Myrtle’s intangible hair.

Ginny ignored the irate female ghost, her gaze following Tom’s gesture. He glowed brighter as the minutes passed, but still Myrtle showed no signs of noticing him.

*“None of my other victims ever became ghosts, as far as I know. Ironical, isn’t it, that the only one who did was completely unable to identify me? Though I couldn’t open the Chamber again while at school, I visited Myrtle often,” Tom continued, now heading over to the sink with the serpentine mark of Slytherin. “Everyone thought it was so **sweet** --dear young Tom, taking the time to visit and comfort his recently departed fellow student. But I looked at her, and I remembered watching her die, the most successful of my attempts. My first kill, but I knew she wouldn’t be my last. Someday, every Muggle stain would be cleaned from this school.”*

Tom beckoned her closer with the crook of an elegant finger, and Ginny walked straight through Myrtle to go to him. She hardly even felt the ghostly cold, though her body automatically shuddered. All she knew in that moment was that Tom wanted her over there, and she would’ve walked through a thousand ghosts to get to him. He paced around her in a circle, letting her get closer to the sink.

“And thanks to you, Ginny, I can finish my work in peace. Thanks to you,” Tom whispered right in her ear, his breath harsh and impossibly warm, “I can kill them all.”

In the hissing voice of Parseltongue, Ginny opened the entrance to the Chamber and summoned the staircase, Tom’s gripping hands hovering tensely over her shoulders as she did. Turning back around, Myrtle’s shouts of outrage coming to her as muted and distant as if Ginny was underwater, she pointed her wand at the ghost.

*“That won’t even **d-d-do** anything to me,” Tom’s first victim whined pitifully at Ginny through the ever-present tears drying on her grimacing face. Ginny ignored her words--only Tom was important--and cast silently. When Ginny and Tom descended down into the black, Myrtle*

was hovering, dazed, completely unable to remember their presence. In her mind, nothing unusual had happened at all.

Ginny erased the staircase with a few more words in Parseltongue, her chest feeling oddly tight. As she stumbled forward, past the old Basilisk skin, her vision faded at the edges. Tom's hand supported her elbow, and he seemed delighted to take more of her weight, his smile growing as she weakened. Ginny wondered absently how long he'd been able to touch her, and her grip on her wand tightened instinctively.

*"Oh, silly girl, there's nothing your wand can do to stop me now. You've become overconfident, thanks to me. All those impossible acts of magic you did, those weren't **you** ! The wordless spells, the wandless magic, the grand acts far beyond your comprehension... everything good about you, you owe to me. I wouldn't have let you make such a fool of yourself in front of the Potter boy, but you threw me away. You thought you didn't **need** me anymore. You are nothing without me, Ginevra, **nothing** ,"* Tom told her seriously, almost regretfully.

How could she possibly do anything but believe him? She had always believed him, she had always trusted him--but no, that wasn't right, she didn't trust him anymore. Why didn't she trust Tom anymore?

Ginny was gasping for air by the time they reached the main hall. Lit by the eerie green light cast by the lake it was underneath, the Chamber was large, grandiose, and creepy. The stone snakes' eyes seemed to follow her, judging her. In this Chamber there was no escape. It felt hollow, and cold, and Tom dropped her carelessly in front of his ancestor's statue.

Ginny landed harshly on her knees, water splashing up her body, soaking her legs and the bottom of her school robes. She felt as dazed as the ghost she had cursed above ground, and the world flickered in and out. Her pulse roared in her ears, and Ginny realized dimly between the beats of her heart that the odd, scratchy noise she could only faintly make out was her own voice, desperate and strained.

*"S-stop. Tom," she pleaded weakly, collapsing forward onto her hands. When had she dropped the diary? When had she released her wand? For there it was, spinning between Tom's thin, pale fingers. That was wrong, that was--that was **hers** . "T-Tom!"*

The spirit just chuckled, crouching down to stroke her hair lightly. Suddenly, the gentle hand on her head gripped her hair, brutally yanking her head up.

*"I can't stop **now** , Ginevra. I've only just begun! All this time, and you **still** don't understand."*

His lips were gentle on her forehead, the kiss soft as butterfly wings and deadly as poison, and then he dropped her completely. Unprepared, Ginny landed face first on cold stone and a thin layer of liquid. Desperately trying and failing to breathe, Ginny drew in not air but bitter lakewater, and her lungs frantically tried to cough it back out. And then she knew no more.

When Snape pulled back out of her mind, they were both breathing harshly. He had only ever known Tom Riddle as Voldemort, and he had looked nothing like the charming head boy at

that point.

Ginny shuddered, feeling his phantom touch on her arm, in her hair. She couldn't pull up a decent mental wall if she tried at the moment. Thankfully Snape was too out of sorts to dive right back in. Maybe she should talk to him first?

"Was he like you expected? Tom, I mean."

"I expected nothing. I did not believe you would have any clear memories of him," Snape said. He looked faintly uncomfortable. "I do not understand why I couldn't pull out of the memory."

"You tried?" Ginny hadn't been able to feel him in her mind at all once he latched on to Tom. "I thought you wanted to watch."

"I wanted to test you," he said disdainfully. "At any rate, I tried to stop and could not. The memory felt strong, which is especially odd given how weak you seemed during it."

Ginny thought it was because she had two memories of it layered on top of each other. It was Tom's memory and hers, and apparently Tom was magnetic even in the echo of an echo. Of course his influence held them captive in her head, even if this was exactly what she was trying to prevent.

"Next time, could you aim for something different?" she asked.

"Next time, block me out," he sneered. "Resume your report."

"On the portraits? Um, one said he thinks Umbridge is using Blood Quills on the students she gives detention to. I feel like that has to be illegal somehow."

"Perhaps. I will inform Professor Dumbledore. What else?"

"Nothing yet. I'll have more once the other students start to trust me more," Ginny said.

"And how will you accomplish that?"

"Agree with most of what they say. If no one brings up blood purity after a while do it myself, but not too obviously. Don't get on their bad sides, be useful in class, listen carefully."

"I suppose the best I can hope for is that you do not mess up those simple methods too dreadfully," Snape said. "Be more disciplined with your mind. I should not have been able to access thoughts that deep."

Ginny bit her tongue before she could snap at him. Her position as a spy was too precarious and relied far too much on him. Mouthing off would be satisfying but a waste of her hard work. "Yes, Professor."

He sniffed. "You are dismissed."

She couldn't get out of there fast enough once he said she could leave. Her lessons with him were worse than any potions class she'd ever had. It was cold, dark, and damp feeling in there, and having his complete negative attention not just on her but in her mind brought that feeling inside.

Once back in the common room she took a scorchingly hot shower and worked to clear her mind. It was always hardest after he had gone digging around in there, stirring things up and breaking down her defenses.

This time she tried to make her defenses two-way. Stray thoughts kept escaping from where she put them. If she could make her barriers stronger, maybe they would keep themselves in line and prevent things from slipping out. Ginny breathed deeply, listening to the humming of her magic, and set to work.

The strongest and most disorienting walls she placed the deepest, layering stone with scales with refracting crystals with thorns. She imagined a lacy net of glimmering gold wrapping around her thoughts, keeping them in. A layer of thick vines and leaves lay over top of that, blocking out the light. She didn't dare place thorns pointing inward, but pointing out they were sharp and curved like the fangs of a basilisk. All memories of Tom were stuffed into their own section, caged in phoenix feathers. The most shallow layers she aimed to make seem mild, natural. Mundane thoughts about breakfast and homework were woven in, concealing the most important things. If someone did attempt to access her thoughts, she would show them nothing to be concerned about, nothing to suggest she knew more.

When she was satisfied, her magic set it all into place. And by the time all of that was done, she was so tired that she fell asleep without a single nightmare, and would have slept through breakfast and her first class if not for her roommates.

Chapter End Notes

...I just realized I don't actually know what stage of creepy Voldy was at when Snape was recruited, probably already partially weird. I swear I had this all sorted out and planned a lot more, but it's become fuzzy over the past couple years. I don't really have the time/desire to reread all of OotP again right now, and I left some notes but not that many, so this might not be as coherent and canon-aligned as it would have been originally.

No promises about updates after the next one, which I have completely written. I'll do my best. Reviews are both great motivators and great reminders, though! Also apparently I have some unposted Ginny fic I didn't remember, also dealing with the chamber of secrets stuff. If I don't fold it in to this I'll probably post it as a separate work.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Ginny attends the pureblood study group for the first time, and makes some progress with Grant--in more ways than one.

Chapter Notes

I return from the dead! With the chapter I wrote forever ago and once more forgot to post. Whoops. Happy New Year! I make no promises about continuing this, but it can't hurt to actually put up the what I already wrote. I had to quit my job and I'm taking less classes next semester, so I'll have more time for art and maaaaybe writing. This isn't the top of my priority list anymore though, I'm just not as into HP as I used to be. :(I'll probably be working on a DC Batfam Sense8 AU, so if you're interested in that I hope to post some of that soon. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

For Ginny, the second weekend couldn't come soon enough. Anticipating not just an increase in her usefulness to the Order, but more time spent with Grant, her mind drifted often to what-ifs. By Saturday she was a jittery mess, her homework scattered in incomplete piles on her bed. Ginny was up that morning as early as she always was, and she waved at a sleepless Harry as she headed out for a run.

She was distracted on her way by a few portraits, and it took her twice as long as it should have to leave the castle proper due to the conversational delays--but it was part of her plan, so she sucked it up and smiled.

Her legs itched, excess energy flooding her system, and after a few warm up laps of the lake, Ginny headed to the empty Quidditch pitch. There, she ran stadiums, sprinting up each section in turn, and as her heart raced her mind calmed. She jogged slowly back on sore legs, feeling drained yet satisfied, her breath scraping her throat in the form of harsh gasps. After lunch Ginny headed off to the library, her schoolbag on her shoulder, her shaking hands tucked into the pockets of her robes, open over pants and a typical uniform dress shirt sans tie.

The library was more crowded than Ginny expected, but she found the group soon enough. They were back in one of the study rooms, occupying a rather large circular table. Books were scattered across the surface, bags and bits of crumpled parchment littered the floor, and a few people were surrounded by either candy wrappers or half-empty mugs. All in all, it looked a fair bit like the Gryffindor common room the day before an exam, an illusion helped by the uniform-free weekend.

Almost no one wore their ties on the weekend, and so Ginny had no way of knowing which house anyone was in unless she asked, but she immediately knew there were no Gryffindors in the lot. For one, she would recognize them. For another, most of them did in fact appear to be seriously studying.

Isobel waved Ginny over, her black hair braided back from her chubby face. There was an empty seat to her right, one of only two at the table, and there Ginny sat, trying in vain to appear relaxed. To Isobel's left was Astoria Greengrass, who was distracted from glaring at Ginny by the need to chug another shot of espresso and find another book.

At least, Ginny guessed so, seeing as how Greengrass disappeared into the stacks with an angry flip of her glossy brown hair as soon as Ginny looked at her.

"Don't mind Astoria," Isobel said softly, her library whisper perfectly clear.

"Of course," said Ginny in a hesitant murmur, and though she resolved to ignore it she did not forget.

"Hello, Ginny," came from off to her right, and three seats over sat Grant, a nearly invisible smile on his face. Between them was a girl who looked a bit like him--similar coloring, maybe a similar eye shape--and a boy Ginny thought was a fifth year Ravenclaw, though she couldn't be sure.

The girl might be Grant's sister, Harper, but it was hard to tell. For one thing, Grant looked like a giant next to the objectively tiny girl, nothing in their bodies alike at all, and for another the facial expression was all wrong. Grant was solemn, mild. He had microexpressions more than expressions. The girl had a glare worse than Greengrass', pinned squarely on Ginny. There was no subtlety there, no mildness.

Unsure what she'd done to incite such passionate hate, Ginny looked past her, waving at Grant with a smile. The girl's scowl deepened. Ah. Perhaps that was the problem?

Ginny resolved to ignore that as well, but she was still so distracted by the daggers coming from maybe-Harper's eyes that it took her a few minutes to realize the pattern to the seating. Under the cover of getting out her books, Ginny scoped out the whole table, and a bracelet here, a scarf there filled in the blanks for those she didn't know offhand.

Ravenclaw, Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Slytherin. They alternated, down to a man, and goosebumps rose on her skin when Ginny realized she occupied a Slytherin spot. A snake in lion's clothing, a voice whispered in her head, and she wondered whether she would've joined this group years ago if the damn Hat had had its way.

The group studied mostly in silence--occasionally quizzing questions and answers, sometimes looking over each others work--but a few mutters did spread through the circle, and Ginny felt curious eyes seeking her each time. Most of the students, however, were more subtle than Greengrass. If they disliked her, they didn't show it. They were cool, distant, polite. Not exactly rolling out the welcome mat, but they didn't lock her out either.

As hours faded by the hostility ceased, even maybe-Harper distracted by complicated work.

At the gradual end of the studying, several students made to start up discussions, but a quick look from Greengrass cut them off. Looking around the circle threateningly, the tall Slytherin silenced them all easily, despite a few being in the years above her.

To be fair, Ginny thought, it was a pretty impressive expression. Worthy of Molly Weasley.

The awkward silence was broken only when a few sixth years got up and headed out, waving goodbye. Their departure sparked a flurry of cleaning, sorting, and searching. Books were returned or checked out, scattered quills summoned, parchment rolled back up, Honeydukes wrappers thrown in the trash.

Ginny slid her books back into her bag semi-neatly, stained and crossed out parchment stuffed in around them, and ended up walking out with Grant. It would've been better if

maybe-Harper wasn't glued to his side, but beggars can't be choosers, she supposed.

"So, was it anything like you thought it would be, Ginny?" Grant asked. She couldn't tell if it was curiosity or manners that opened his mouth, but he didn't seem the type to ask questions he didn't want answers to.

Ginny smiled up at him, her head tilted a bit. "I didn't really know what to expect. I've never done the whole 'big study group' thing, but it was nice. Helpful."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. Does that mean you'll come next Saturday, too?"

"I didn't know it was a standing invitation," Ginny replied, mock-casually. Internally, she was chanting 'yes' over and over again. This was it! Her ticket in. She had to fight to keep her breathing even, to keep her excitement from bursting out of her. Her magic heated up in her chest, expanding.

"It wasn't," the girl at his side bit out harshly, jerking Grant, and by extension Ginny, to a halt.

Ginny wondered, absently, if her jaw hurt. It was clenched awfully tight.

"Harper!" Grant hissed, his eyes wide. Well, that was one thing confirmed.

Ginny's hand clenched on the strap of her bag, but her face stayed calm. "It's alright. If I'm not wanted, I don't want to be there. It was obvious enough that I was making people uncomfortable, so it's probably better this way."

Despite her neutral face and hopefully even tone, her magical core turned from a slow simmer into a rolling boil. Ginny turned on her heel, determined to make her escape before she lost her infamous Weasley temper.

She wasn't expecting Grant to follow her.

She got three stacks farther out of the library before he caught up to her, his long legs quickly eating up more distance than hers. Tall beat average, Ginny supposed, but she ground her teeth and walked faster. Her sore legs protested, but it was only pain. Pain beat humiliation every time.

"Ginny!" Grant called.

Her pride pushed her on, deliberately ignoring him.

"Ginny," he said desperately, "Harper didn't mean that."

She scoffed.

"Okay, well, maybe she did, but I didn't. Just--come here," he insisted, stepping in front of her. His hands were empty, no wand in sight, and he held them up before her like a shield or a plea.

She considered stepping around him, but instead she stopped. Snape would never let her live it down if she didn't use this opportunity.

He took her continued presence as agreement, and a large hand drew Ginny into the aisle between a few vacant bookshelves. "I'm sorry about her, I swear she's not always like that."

"Then why was she? She was glaring at me the entire time and I've never done anything to her."

"Don't take this the wrong way, she just doesn't really like..."

"Weasleys? Gryffindors?"

"Blood traitors. I know, I know, that's not a popular thing to say, but she feels pretty strongly about it." Grant looked away. He didn't mention how he felt about it.

"So, definitely most Weasleys. And probably most Gryffindors. But not me," Ginny said.

Grant looked surprised. "Not you? But you're a Weasley. And I thought you hung around that bushy haired muggleborn girl."

"I might be a Weasley but at least I'm still a pureblood. Hermione is just some stupid friend of my brother's, I have to tolerate her or the rest of my family will make my life difficult,"

Ginny said, the lies tasting like ash on her tongue. For a moment she was uncomfortably aware that Hermione had no clue what she was doing, and that if she found out Ginny couldn't tell her why. How would she feel if she heard Ginny say this?

"Oh. Then I'm sure Harper will change her mind. She just didn't want you hanging around us if you were going to throw a fit about it," Grant said, sounding relieved.

"And what about you? You still wanted me to come back even if I was a blood traitor, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah."

"So you didn't mind?"

He smiled a bit. "I can't say I'm not relieved to know the truth, but I think cutting ourselves off from other purebloods without even talking isn't the most practical choice in the long run. Also, you're cute."

"Cute?" Ginny couldn't say what her face looked like then, but there was definitely some eyebrow movement involved. She hoped she wasn't blushing too much.

"Very. Don't go fishing for more compliments, though."

Ginny's blush deepened. She could feel it warming up her face. He smiled again, wider this time. Oh no, she thought. He has a dimple.

"I wasn't! I just wanted to be sure." She honestly wasn't sure where to go from there. When she had planned conversations like this with Snape, there had been no discussion of feelings. What did you say when a boy told you you were cute?

"Come on, let me walk you back," he said, stepping aside.

As they walked back through the main section of the library, he walked over two feet away, but it seemed closer to her. She could still feel the echo of his hand on her arm.

"So, what's Harper normally like? When she's not trying to kill me with her eyes, I mean."

"Don't worry, she was never great at wandless magic. You're safe on that front. She's... um, I don't know. Driven, outspoken. She likes talking about history, she's the only person I know who can pay attention in that class."

"She can actually stay awake? Forget wandless magic, that's way harder." Against her will, Ginny caught herself admiring Harper. Until she remembered how uptight she was about blood purity, that is.

"I know, right? I can't believe it. I get through by reading the textbook, but she'll take notes in class and then check out half a dozen extra books."

"Sounds like she belongs in Ravenclaw, but I've never noticed her before."

"No, she's in Slytherin. She's smart, but lots of smart people aren't in Ravenclaw. I guess the Hat just thought that's where she belongs."

Ah, yes. The damn Hat again. "I'm sure it knows best."

They made small talk the whole way back, and she had him leave her at the base of a stairwell a few halls from the Gryffindor common room. She didn't want to explain his presence to the Fat Lady or anyone they might run into.

The rest of her homework could wait. She had some serious meditating to do.

Please let me know what you think! Comments have really inspired me before to keep working on this, so they increase the chance I'll write more of it. Also I just love finding out what you guys got from it.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!