Explosive Situation

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by tyrannic_puppy

Summary

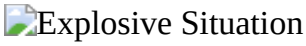
It's been years since the war finished, but Harry now faces the most difficult challenge of his life, confessing the truth. A truth that will shatter his world in ways he cannot yet fathom.

Notes

A/N: It has taken me ten long years, and the assistance of a very patient and tolerant beta, but at last this is complete. I found the notebook in which I jotted down the original idea a few months back and noted that I dated the page 13/07/11, so I set myself the challenge of getting the ending to work finally. I hope you enjoyed what is probably the weirdest amalgamation of my writing styles given its long gestation period.

Beta'd by QED.

See the end of the work for more notes



"Why can't you just admit it, Hermione?" Harry demanded, cementing the end of the happy day he'd been having with his best friend up to that moment.

"Because it just isn't true, Harry." She replied, turning on him with a look that would have Death Eaters quivering in fear.

"How can you keep lying to yourself like this? I'm crazy about you, Hermione; I always have been. I was just too afraid to notice it before." Harry had pictured his confession going over much more smoothly than this. "And I know you feel the same, if you'd only be honest with yourself."

"Please, Harry. We can't. *I* can't. *Ron*, Harry. Think of what you're saying; it would destroy him. Don't you care about him?"

"Of course I do. But I can't keep ignoring how I feel." He pleaded, opening himself fully to her. "I lov..."

"DON'T, Harry!" Hermione snapped as Harry withered under her furious gaze. "Just don't. We can't, it... We just can't."

"Please, Hermione. Denying this is like dying all over again." Tears now streaming down his face.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I..."

And with a sudden turn, Hermione disapparated away, a single tear falling from where her face had been only moments before.

Pain tore through Harry, buckling his knees. It was worse than anything he had experienced during the war. He would rather submit to a million Cruciatus curses than endure another moment of this. A tortured growl ripped past his throat as the world spun, the sound of electricity sparking throughout the room.

Bright arcs leapt from wall to wall, the air protesting vehemently at the intrusion. The room around him blurred as little shards of something sliced past his vision, until his world went black; the last sounds to reach his ears were his own tormented screams bouncing off wood and metal rending themselves apart.

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A small pop broke the usual peaceful sounds outside the country estate as Ron checked his robes. Ever since he'd been accidentally splinched during the war, he always checked himself

for damage after every apparition. Normally he wouldn't even bother with the form of travel, but his attempts to reach Harry's place through the Floo network had all failed.

The tall gates still looked imposing to Ron every time he passed through them, looking just like the gates of Hogwarts had back in their school years. But beyond the gates, chaos reigned in the yard. Timber was strewn all over the place, shattered and burning. Cracked tiles and torn sheets of tin were embedded in the trees lining the drive up to where the house had stood only days ago. Instead, now all that could be seen was a giant pile of rubble smouldering away.

Ron raced towards the destruction, fear clutching at him. Harry was supposed to be home all day. The once beautiful house looked as though it had collapsed in on top of whatever explosion had rocked its foundations. He frantically shifted through debris, trying to find some clue that his best friend was not buried within.

The longer he searched, the more terror spread throughout his mind as he flipped debris away, searching frantically. Somehow, he knew Harry was buried under this mess, and he was probably badly hurt. He wouldn't be able to find him in time to get him to help. He needed help of his own.

"KREACHER!" Ron yelled to the four winds, hoping the elf would obey him today.

"Yes, Master Weasel." The croaking voice called almost before the small crack had subsided. "What happened..."

"No time, Kreacher, I think Harry is under there! Can you find him and get him to St Mungo's?"

"At once, Master Weasel." And with that Kreacher vanished.

A huge chunk of debris suddenly collapsed in on itself, and moments later Kreacher popped back in front of Ron, grasped his leg, and Ron felt himself being dragged from the horrific sight. When he could breathe again, he found himself surrounded by white sterile walls, medi-wizards rushing about, jostling him as they worked over the filthy body lying in front of him. Harry was covered in dirt and dried blood. Deep cuts ran all down his arms, and his face looked swollen; his clothing was in tatters. Ron shuddered as he grabbed the nearest healer.

"How is he? Is he going to be ok? Did I get to him in time?"

"We don't know yet. He just got here; now go back out to the waiting room and let us work." The girl demanded, shaking his grip from her arm and pushing him towards the door.

Ron had seen Harry in the hospital many times over the years, but never had he looked this bad.

"Master Weasel?" Ron was distracted from his train of thought as Kreacher tugged at his pant leg; the normally sour-looking elf seemed surprisingly concerned. "What happened to Master Harry?"

Ron shook his head as the horrific destruction was thrust to the forefront of his mind. "I'm not sure, Kreacher; the place was destroyed when I got there. That must have been why I couldn't Floo to the house. If only I'd come sooner, maybe I could have done something."

"Is not your fault, Master Weasel. The room Master had been in was completely destroyed, as if something had exploded. Kreacher has never seen anything so horrible. Master is lucky you came by when you did, sir."

"Thanks, Kreacher, but still." Ron sighed loudly, running his hands through his matted hair. He looked down at his hands and realised he was just as covered in filth as Harry. "Maybe I should get cleaned up. Can you come to find me as soon as they know his condition, Kreacher?"

"Of course, sir. Allow me." Kreacher grabbed him again, and a moment later they were back at Ron's place. "I'll come back as soon as there is news." And then Kreacher was gone.

The silence of the house crushed in on Ron as he stood in the living room, the warmth of the fire in the hearth not reaching him despite his proximity. The chill of what he'd seen today settled fully over him as he shivered and headed for the bathroom.

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"WHAT!?" Hermione shrieked.

"The house is completely trashed," Neville replied, concern lacing his voice. "There are bits of it all over the estate. Looks like a bomb went off."

"And Harry?"

"Ron found him and got him to St Mungo's. They were both still there when I left, but, Hermione, it doesn't look good. Harry's in a coma and he's really banged up. Looks like he was inside when it all came down. Ron's barely left his side since the healers finished working on him."

Hermione felt like someone was crushing her heart as the news sank in. Was this her fault? She had left things so badly; perhaps someone had made the most of Harry's distracted state. How long after she left had this happened?

"Hermione! Did you hear me?" Neville asked, drawing her gaze once more.

"I'm sorry?"

"I have to go and tell the others. Are you going to be ok?"

"I'll be fine, Neville." She lied, hoping he would leave her to her thoughts.

"I'll come back when I'm done, ok?"

Hermione just nodded this time, looking deeply into her own hands as she heard Neville's face disappear from her fireplace, leaving behind the crackling of the logs. Harry was nearly

dead, and something deep inside her told Hermione that she was responsible.

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There must have been another serious accident; there were healers and nurses running all over, treating people in the corridors. Blood had slicked the floor, causing many of them to lose their footing, but Hermione just strode straight over it, not hesitating for a moment. Until she reached that door. Swinging it wide and stepping inside, she couldn't help but notice the stark difference the thin wall made. There were no medi wizards in here, no one rushing about fussing over the body on the bed.

Harry Potter had spent many nights wrapped in the crisp white linen of a hospital bed, yet in all the years she had known him, Hermione had never seen Harry's body so broken. Bruises lined almost all of his visible skin. Minute threads of blood gathered along most of his body, both out of and under the blanket, slowly staining the soft material. Several much deeper cuts showed signs of recent treatment, which she assumed had come from having a large building dropped on his head.

His hair, normally untamed and wild, looked as though he had stuck his wand in an electrical socket. Something she had witnessed Harry try to do one day as he was curious as to how magic and electricity would mix. Despite herself and the situation, Hermione couldn't help but grin at the stupidity of her best friend. Surviving the worst war in recent history only to risk his life testing a crazy idea instead of just reading the answer in a book.

That was Harry in adulthood. Every bit the crazy mischief-maker his parents had been rumoured to be. It was as though he was making up for all those years of true childhood he had missed while being trained for battle.

Taking the seat by the bed, Hermione slipped her fingers into his battered hand and gripped it gently. If Harry was aware of her presence, he made no sign as she stared at his ruined face. Somehow, she had hoped that Neville had been exaggerating his wounds or the coma. She wanted nothing more right now than to speak with her friend.

"I'm so sorry, Harry." Tears breached her defences as she wept onto his hand, the salty liquid tumbling down the uneven surface. "I shouldn't have left you like that."

Glancing up at his face, she could detect no change. This set a fresh course of tears streaming down her face; it's not like she really thought her presence would make any difference to his condition. In all the time that she had known him, Harry had never been able to hide his true thoughts from her. She could read his face like one of her favourite books; every line and movement that most people completely missed told her volumes. But now he was completely still but for the soft, laboured breathing.

She could feel his ragged, chugging pulse beneath the damaged skin of his wrist and her heart broke for him.

"I made you vulnerable." She whispered, "Just like you've always made me."

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Despite having the best medi-wizards in the world, piles of Galleons in charitable donations and a period of peace that had left the hospital almost devoid of patients most days, they sure had some fucking horrible coffee, Ron thought.

It was like a monkey had peed in battery acid. Ron had always found Harry's muggle analogies hilarious, but in this case, he felt it to be actually true. It burned roughly as it drained down his throat, but it had the desired effect of keeping him as far from sleep as he could get.

The healers had been working over Harry for several days when the collapse of some pompous idiot's banquet hall had brought them many 'more urgent' cases. Thankfully, they had managed to stabilise Harry's wounds before the first injuries had rolled in, but he was far from cured. He'd been unable to continue standing in the room looking at the still ravaged body of his best friend.

He sighed heavily as he threw the empty cup away. Feeling lost on what to do next, he decided to return to Harry's room and await the others. At least he could update them on his status when they all began to arrive; visitors had been forbidden during the initial stages of his treatment.

His fingers closed softly over the cold metal handle to the room as he heard his girlfriend's soft whispers through the thin wall.

"I made you vulnerable." Ron stopped. He hadn't heard such pain in Hermione's voice in years. He just wanted to wrap her in his arms and hold her as the pain subsided, but he knew she would not be pleased with him interrupting her talk with Harry, and he couldn't take an argument with her over something so trivial right now. So, he released the handle and waited outside, wanting to be nearby if she truly needed him.

"Just like you've always made me." This Ron could understand; Hermione had always leaned on Harry in the darker times. Some of which had been his own doing. She'd needed him so many times. Always the most when Ron had been in one of his tantrums and left her all alone.

"Life was always so complicated around you; I guess I wanted to maintain the one normal thing we had going. I didn't want to lose my best friend. I needed you too much to be honest with myself."

Ron felt a little uncomfortable that he was unintentionally encroaching on her moment with their friend.

"So, we both settled. Took the life we thought we wanted. Until you weren't satisfied with that anymore. I knew it the moment you bought that land and showed me the plans. It wasn't a plan for a bachelor's house."

Ron had to suppress a laugh as he had made the same remark the first time he'd been shown Harry's plans for his new home. A massive mansion in the country was perfect for raising the family Harry had craved his whole life. All he had lacked was someone to share it with since he and Ginny had gone their separate ways three years earlier.

"We both knew it was coming, but you were ready to embrace it while I was still hiding from it. I didn't want to admit that things had changed. That you were right."

Ron was confused now. He hadn't noticed anything changing with Harry except his home address. He still had the same clothes, the same job. He was still Harry. Just Harry.

"But now I have to admit it to us both. You were right, Harry. I do love you."

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Anger raked through his body in a way Ron had never felt before. Those hurtful sounds were still echoing around his brain. *I do love you.* He had apparated away the moment the sentence had registered itself in his brain, and now the bastard thing wouldn't let go.

Standing in his own lounge, he huffed violently as he took in the lie he had been living all this time. A secret only to himself. Pictures of Hermione and himself stared down at him, their smiles taunting his pain, whipping him into an even more agitated state. He wanted them to stop, to let him process in peace, but they wouldn't look away. His eye caught a picture of the three of them together at some stupid wizarding event thrown by the Ministry, all smiles and laughter and something in him snapped.

His wand was in his hand before he even realised he had cast the spell, but the pictures on the far wall exploded when the reductor curse hit home. Instead of making him feel some momentary peace, his action made him all the angrier. Harry had ruined his life, and now he was destroying it further himself.

Ron screamed at the top of his lungs as he grabbed the closest end of the long couch beside him and hurled it across the room. It made such a satisfying crunch as it destroyed the TV Hermione had bought him to try and teach him more about Muggles. He was done with being her charity case.

Despite the moment of pleasure he had gotten from the action, he still found himself tormented by everything else in the room. Everything in here was a harsh reminder that his life for the past several years had been nothing but pity from the woman he thought had loved him, while in truth she prepared herself to love his best friend.

Ron scoffed as he flicked his wand, sending the mahogany bookshelf to his right crashing into the kitchen, the books on it scattering everywhere. Best friend. That was a joke. No friend would do to him what Harry had just done. Would ruin everything over a girl.

Unable to contain his rage any longer, Ron began throwing curses at everything that caught his eye. The rest of the pictures on the walls and tables were quickly reduced to rubble. Furniture went tumbling up the stairs, destroying anything unlucky enough to be in its way. Cupboards flew open and their contents sprayed out, embedding themselves into the walls and cracking the windows.

Ron was so consumed with rage it wasn't until the seventh chime that he realised the ringing in his ears was his doorbell. Another hasty reductor curse made short work of the large wooden door that had once separated his home from the outside.

"That was a beautiful curse, Ron." Luna cooed, a wide smile on her face. "Was it infested?"

Despite the anger he felt towards his *friends,* Ron felt the calm confusion Luna always inspired within him at her childlike look at the world settling over his mind. "Was it what?"

"Infested." Luna stepped inside and took a glance around the now destroyed living room. "You've had a real problem with the Humdingers for years. I was wondering when you were going to get around to clearing them out."

He couldn't help but stare, mouth agape at the witch in front of him. She just smiled softly as she gazed about his now destroyed flat. Even though many people thought her a raving loon, Ron had always been amazed at the wide-eyed way Luna looked at the world.

"If you're finished, we can still make our movie. But I can stay and help if you think you missed some. Though I have been looking forward to it all day."

Closing his mouth and tucking his wand into his back pocket, Ron linked arms with Luna and led her back through the open doorway, paying no mind to the chaos behind him, hoping that once more Luna could help him through the hell he was now experiencing. Just as she had after their escape from Malfoy Manor all those years ago.

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Pain flared through every fibre of his body. A feeling Harry was not unaccustomed to, but unwelcome nonetheless. This was far worse than any pain he'd felt before. It was as if his entire body had been ripped apart and then put back together by a troll using a crochet needle. He tried to open his eyes, but even his eyelids were so sore it hurt to move them.

He suddenly became acutely aware of just how hard it was to even breathe. It felt like someone was sitting on his chest, pressing against him every time he sucked in air.

Finally forcing his eyes to part, he realised he wasn't far wrong. A mop of unruly brown hair was spread across his torso, hiding the softly snoring face of its owner. Not that Harry couldn't pick it from a mile away, even without his glasses. Despite the pain it caused him, he found himself smiling at her prone form.

He wanted to hate her for denying what he knew was the truth, but he knew he could never truly stay mad at her. Especially not given she was by his side again when he truly needed her. Even after the biggest argument they'd ever had. He chuckled to himself wondering if there was anything he could do that would make her never want to see him again, but immediately regretted it as pain tore through both his chest at the movement and his heart at the idea of being truly without Hermione.

Still, she did not rouse, and Harry found himself becoming accustomed to her presence on his aching chest. He finally tore his eyes from her sleeping form and realised where he was. He was no stranger to St. Mungo's; in fact, one of the head healers had offered to put a permanent name tag on his room if he'd had to visit again. Harry had just laughed and offered to put the man on retainer, much to Hermione's chagrin. This, however, was not his regular room. This was the emergency area. As often as Harry had been in the hospital, he'd never

woken up in here before. The healers had always managed to have him patched up enough to relocate him to a less vital area before he came to.

He began to look down at his own body again, this time looking past the sleeping witch and seeing his arms for the first time. The dried blood and bruising stood out harshly under the bright light of the room, highlighting just how badly damaged he was. No wonder every breath he took spread painfully throughout his entire body. Even with all the odd injuries he'd sustained in his life, he'd never felt this much pain, or this drained before.

Remembering that he had left his wand on his side table when Hermione had arrived, and with his arm trapped under Hermione, he tried to wandlessly summon his glasses so that he could see the full extent of the damage. But nothing happened. Nothing moved in the room at all. Harry was very confused now. He had summoned his glasses without his wand many times before, but now nothing. Either they weren't here, or they were resolutely staying put despite his best efforts.

He took several deep breaths, trying to centre himself and gather his thoughts. Maybe he was just not focused enough, having just woken up in a hospital bed. Several minutes passed as he cleared his thoughts and focused his mind on his goal. "*Accio glasses*!"

This time something on the side table scraped softly in his direction, but only by a centimetre or two. Now he was becoming agitated. He'd been badly injured many times, but he'd never been unable to use magic when he'd woken back up. Just what had happened that had left him so... empty.

He closed his eyes and leaned back against his pillow, fighting the urge to groan as he shifted under Hermione's weight. He tried to cast his mind back, struggling to remember what had happened. He could still vividly remember arguing with Hermione. Harry doubted he would ever be able to forget that discussion. Her sudden disapparation had left him heartbroken, but that hadn't been enough to sap his magic.

He still felt the tingling he'd always associated with magic after she had left. The pressure had built under his skin as he knelt in his empty sitting room. Staring, unseeing at the roof of the tall room, he could physically hear the energy coursing through him, as every hair on his body stood on end. He couldn't even fathom the emotions rippling out of his body. It was then that his eyes caught sight of the tear that had fallen from Hermione as she left.

It undulated as it passed through the charged air, drawing his full attention as he observed its impossibly slow fall. He was trapped in this moment, with that tear being the only part of her he had left. The close feeling of the charged air increased around him twofold with every millimetre the small liquid fell until it finally shattered against the carpeted floor in front of him, mirroring his own feelings.

At that moment, Harry screamed. Every feeling, every thought, every molecule of his body tearing itself away from him as he did. And yet somehow, he remained conscious. He could see the floor ripping itself apart in front of his knees. Hear the wooden panels beside him groaning as they tore themselves apart. And he could feel the heavy beams of the ceiling wrench themselves free, loosening the floor above until darkness finally took him and his

dream home, now devoid of all purpose without her, came crashing down around him as his world had only seconds earlier.

Opening his eyes to the hospital room once more, he found a pair of brown ones boring into his own. She must have stirred while he was buried in his own memories, the pain in them masking the pain he must have felt as she did so. Now he was unable to look anywhere else as they held him imprisoned in their unfathomable depths.

Harry had always thought he had known what Hermione was thinking. Was always able to discern the truth of what she wasn't saying just by looking into those chocolate irises, but right now they were impossible to read. He had no idea just how long they both lay perfectly still staring at one another, not speaking a word, not moving a muscle. It could have been days, for all he could tell.

The world outside that room no longer existed. All that remained were those eyes. He could just barely recognise the damp feeling of the shirt under her cheek, but anything further from her face than that receded until it became utterly immaterial.

As unreadable as her expression was, their last talk was still burning fresh in his mind. Afraid to make her leave again, Harry couldn't bring himself to utter a word to break the silence. And yet he felt more at peace at that moment than he had in years. Whatever the outcome of the next conversation they had, his entire truth was now laid bare before her.

"Harry," her soft voice finally squeaked, clearly stressed, but still as melodic in his ears as ever.

Still afraid to move for fear of breaking whatever spell was keeping her from leaving, Harry did nothing. He didn't speak; he didn't move. The only acknowledgement he gave that he'd heard her was a single heavy blink.

"I'm sorry."

Harry felt a frown spread over his face. What did she have to be sorry for? He was the one who had pressed an impossible issue.

"You were attacked because of me." Hermione continued, clearly reading the unspoken question written across his face.

Time in the rest of the room began to move again for Harry as an unwanted raspy laugh pulled its way from his chest, hurting the whole way out.

Now it was Hermione's turn to frown as she lifted her head from his chest, and despite the small relief his body took from the reduction in weight, Harry found he missed the contact immediately.

"What exactly about that is funny?"

"It's not." Harry finally shared, knowing he had to assuage her guilt. "I wasn't attacked, Hermione."

"Ron found you buried underneath your destroyed home, Harry. How do you explain your injuries if you weren't attacked?"

Harry pondered her for a moment. "I don't think you'd believe me."

"Try me!" Her voice was as soft as silk, yet there was a demand in those words Harry could not ignore.

"I think…" Harry paused, wondering how best to describe it, but seeing the quickly building retort, he continued, "I exploded."

Whatever Hermione had been expecting him to say, it clearly had not been that. Confusion was now clear on her features. And the momentary bluster she had been developing went out of her like a balloon.

"Magically, at least. I've never had an accidental outburst of that size before, but I think I blew up my sitting room." Harry shrugged.

Hermione stared at him, and Harry was still unsure what was going through her mind. Deciding she would drag it out of him eventually, he slowly began to detail exactly what he remembered happening. Leaving out the fact that it all had gone down in the fraction of a second it had taken her departing tear to fall to the floor. When he finally finished explaining, she looked both gobsmacked and, did he dare say, proud?

"I always knew you were a powerful wizard, Harry, but that's just ridiculous. From what Neville told me, you demolished the entire house. With a single burst of uncontrolled magic. You stub your toe after I left or something?" A smirk appeared on her face for the first time since he had awoken.

"Not exactly," Harry mumbled, finally breaking the eye contact they had held since he'd returned from his memories.

He felt Hermione's strong fingers guide his face back to her own. Her eyes drew his attention despite his best effort to remain evasive. Things were finally beginning to feel normal between the two of them again, and he couldn't go on if she left him like that again. "Not exactly? Meaning what, *exactly*?"

Harry took several deep breaths as they continued their staring match. Her eyes were drilling into his own, searching out the answers she knew he was trying to keep hidden from her. Harry wished he had given more effort during his Occlumency lessons as he struggled to keep that final truth concealed. It was with a deeply concerted effort that he was once again able to tear his eyes free of her questioning gaze.

Her fingers slipped from his chin as a barely audible 'oh' escaped her lips.

Damnit, he thought, clenching his eyes tightly and waiting for the pop of her departure.

"I'm so sorry, Harry."

That was not what he was expecting to hear. Looking back up, he found her now avoiding his gaze.

"You don't have to be sorry, Hermione. I was asking way too much of you."

"I can't fault you for asking for the truth."

Now it was Harry's turn to look confused. He remembered every word they'd said to each other in the sitting room. She made it very clear how she felt. Hermione stood from her chair, slowly turning away from him, staring momentarily at the white double doors leading out of the room. She was going to run again, just on foot this time. Harry felt his heart lurch in his chest and a very unwelcome crackle build in his damaged skin.

Trying his hardest to squash the feeling building inside his suddenly frail body, he stared at the darkness outside the window, the only indicator of what time it was, giving him no comfort. He felt the mattress by his side sink as someone sat beside him. Turning back, he found Hermione now only inches away from his own tear-streaked face.

"I love you too."

And with that, her lips were against his own, and every light in the hospital was immediately extinguished, causing chaos throughout the building.

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Luna had thoroughly enjoyed the movies. A double feature of two ridiculously 'explodey cop romps' as Ron called them. Or noisy wastes of time as Hermione called them whenever the boys forced her to go to one. Movie night was quite possibly the greatest thing Harry and Hermione had helped introduce into her life after Hogwarts. These films the Muggles made were fascinating. They moved like pictures in the magical world but somehow were even better. And the fact that Ron was just as excited by them made it even more special.

She'd been enamoured by the red-headed wizard since they'd met at Hogwarts all those years ago. He made her feel special without even trying. He would often show up at the flat after he and Hermione had finished one of their many arguments. Having resigned himself years ago to the fact that Hermione would always go to Harry after, he'd had to find a new outlet for his frustration. And he'd found it in her. Sometimes they would go to the local pub and have a quiet drink together and others they'd just sit on her couch for hours talking.

Soon they had taken to these fortnightly film nights as the local cinema held a throwback double feature night, and Harry and Hermione were usually too busy to go with him, so he'd taken to bringing her. It had made it their special time, free from the troubles and problems of the world. And with every week they went, Luna found herself more in love with the stubborn git beside her.

Tonight, he had needed it even more than she did, though. Despite what everyone thought behind her back, she couldn't actually read their minds, but she was tremendously observant, and the destruction Ron had caused in his flat before they left was unlike anything she'd seen before. She had to distract him with one of Daddy's lost causes before he would calm down

enough for her to get him out of there. She smiled as she thought about how often her friends forgot she was a Ravenclaw through and through.

Even stepping back into the war zone Ron had once called his living room wasn't enough to break his high after such an action-packed set of films. Luna watched him stumble through the splintered furniture and flip the couch back over before taking a seat on the now very saggy end.

"Come on, Luna, take a seat." He indicated the place beside him as she wandered over.

Despite their surroundings, Ron was glowing. It was another thing that drew her to him. Ron developed a childlike glee at things her other friends took for granted. And while his anger could quickly get him into trouble, he always managed to bounce back amazingly fast.

She could tell that he was replaying the action scenes in his head as he swayed back and forth on the couch. He barely even registered as her fingers slipped into his own, but his eyes did refocus on her after a moment. She just smiled at him, the same wide smile she'd given him a hundred times.

But this time he returned it before leaning over and gently pressing his lips to her mouth.

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Once the lights had returned, Hermione found herself once more lost in those emerald irises. Every bit of the love he had so vehemently confessed to her days earlier was staring out at her unfettered. And for the first time, she was certain he was seeing the same thing in her own gaze.

"Harry…" Hermione began, but was quickly silenced by Harry's lips as they pressed into her own once more.

There was no urgency to it, no pushing for anything more. He had clearly just wanted to stop her from thinking, and she hated to admit it, but every time she felt his lips against her own, her brain gave up all pretence of intelligence.

As he pulled away once more, her lips still tingled. "What did you think I was going to do before?" She managed to complete her earlier thought before he could distract her again.

"Um," an embarrassed look spread over his features, and he avoided her gaze, "...leave." He finally whispered almost deathly quietly.

"Oh," Realisation coursed through her once again active mind as she considered. The last time she had left, he had levelled a house. He must have lost control again when he thought it was going to happen all over again. "So, it was you who turned out the lights."

Harry blushed bright red. "I'm sorry, I just lost control. You affect me like no one else ever has, Hermione. When I thought you had rejected me again…"

She knew what he meant. It had nearly torn her in two to leave him in that sitting room all alone. She had to escape before she did something that would hurt them all for years to come.

And in the end, she still had. Ron was never going to forgive her for this. Or Harry. He'd always had an intense rivalry with his best friend, a need to prove that he was just as important as the Chosen One. And though she hated to think of it that way, she had been the one thing Ron had that Harry never did, in Ron's mind at least.

It had been the cause of many of their fights. Not to mention the reason behind the failure of nearly every relationship Harry had ever been in. No matter what they said, his girlfriends were always threatened by his relationship with Hermione, and now she could see what they had seen. What everyone had seen.

She crashed her lips against Harry's once more, needing a break from her own brain. She could get used to using him for this.

"Hermione," Harry whispered into her as the chaste kiss broke apart once more, "As much as I would love to keep kissing you all night," he pulled back, his unfocused eyes on her nose, "can you please call a healer in…"

His voice tapered off quickly as he collapsed back onto his pillow, unconscious again. As she tore out of his room, she noticed things had become substantially quieter in the halls since she'd arrived, but this only made it more difficult to find Healer Maybach.

"Healer! Quickly! *Harry*!" She panted out, not realising she was quite so out of breath.

Once back in the room, they found Harry in roughly the same position he had lain since his arrival, but it was clear he was still in no condition to leave. The Healer immediately got to work, her wand passing over Harry's mottled skin, reverting it almost back to its usual hue over several long minutes. Hermione found that she was playing with the ends of the hair hanging over her shoulder, a nervous habit she had developed after many years of watching Harry's treatments, never knowing which one might be his last.

She could clearly remember every single time he'd been to the hospital wing at Hogwarts. Every cracked bone, every bruise. She'd been with him for it all. And the dozens of trips here to St Mungo's as well. Harry was well on his way to being a triple-digit patient. And through it all, she'd never left his side. Except for the other day in that sitting room. Things began to become clear to her as she looked back. Without the haze of stubbornness clouding the past, she could see her feelings for Harry were always there, hiding just behind the mask she'd so carefully built during her early school years.

What she'd originally crafted to keep her from childish teasing had led to her denying a huge portion of who she was for far too many years. She knew it would be impossible to pinpoint the exact moment she had truly fallen for him, but the fact was that she was now fully aware of her feelings, and there was no sealing that bottle back up.

Hermione Granger was absolutely, irrevocably head over heels in love with Harry Potter. And somehow, he felt the same about her.

Splinters of wood covered almost every inch of the lush grass lawn he had once kept so carefully. Entire support beams had been reduced to a fine powder as Kreacher stepped cautiously between the rubble. As much as he had missed Grimmauld Place, he could understand Master's reluctance to live there. The constant reminder of his lost godfather and all the suffering that had gone by inside those walls.

Master Harry had needed somewhere new, somewhere he could have the family he'd longed after for most of his life. And this house had been perfect, by Master Harry's very careful design. He and Kreacher had spent months getting everything just right, and now all that hard work was gone.

Sighing, he pushed aside what used to be the ceiling of the master bedroom and finally laid his eyes upon what he'd been searching for for days now. The holly wand sang beneath his fingers as he picked it up. There was a longing pulsing from the wood as though it ached for its master.

After pulling Harry from the rubble, Kreacher had quickly noticed he hadn't been wearing his wand. A trait he had developed while they built this house. Harry had begun to feel so at home he felt he didn't need to wear it every moment of the day. It brought him an odd joy to build and modify the house in the Muggle fashion, and while Kreacher occasionally cheated when Harry wasn't looking, he too found he enjoyed some of the methods the Muggles had come up with in the absence of magic.

Looking back down through the rubble, Kreacher noticed a flash of colour from where he had just recovered the wand. Reaching through the gap, he felt his hand close around a small piece of paper of some sort. Pulling it free, he found it to be a photo, one he'd seen many times before. It had sat proudly on Master Harry's side table in a plain timber frame. It was his Master's favourite, Kreacher knew.

Tucking both the wand and picture into his pocket, he took one more look about the destruction before he disappeared with a pop.

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The soft noise brought Hermione back from memory lane as she sat beside a sleeping Harry. Kreacher stood in the corner of the room silently watching the pair with an unreadable look on the aged elf's face.

"Mistress." He greeted, bowing low.

Hermione just nodded. She hadn't spoken a word since the Healer had finished working over Harry. Several of their friends had even popped in to see how he was doing, yet she couldn't bring herself to answer them. Apparently, all his physical wounds were now healing properly, and he would be fine in a day or two, but seeing him in this weakened state still bothered her deeply. The Healer had administered a deep sleeping potion, even though Harry was still unconscious and quickly swept from the room.

Kreacher slowly approached her, glancing momentarily at her hand firmly grasping Harry's as he slept. "Master left these at the house. Kreacher knew he would want them when he

woke."

He reached into his pocket and passed her a very dusty wand and a miraculously undamaged photograph. Taking them both from the elf, Hermione looked at the photo. It was her and Harry on the day they had officially graduated Hogwarts, something they'd had to return after the war to do. They were both dressed in their Gryffindor uniform, but in typical fashion, hers was immaculate while Harry's looked as though he could barely operate his own buttons, his tie askew and his hair as resolutely messy as ever.

Arms around each other, they both beamed brightly from the picture, occasionally looking at each other and breaking out into laughter. It had been the happiest moment of her life. The culmination of so many years of effort. Not just of study, but of motivating Harry to focus on his own. And after all they'd been through in the years beforehand, a moment of normalcy they would share forever. Ron had chosen to help George run the shop in his brother's absence, so it had been just the two of them again.

"Thank you, Kreacher. I'm sure Harry will be very pleased to see them."

Kreacher nodded in response before disappearing once more, leaving the room in silence. Hermione knew Harry had this photograph. She had an identical one on the wall in her flat. But something about it nagged in her mind. It was absolutely perfect. Not a scratch or mark anywhere to be found on it. His wand was covered in grime and dust from the wreckage, but the photo was as shiny and clean as the day it had been developed. If they had both been in the house, how could it be in such a pristine state?

She balanced the photo on her knee and waved Harry's wand over it. "*Revelio*."

The picture glowed for a moment as she saw the number of enchantments Harry had cast on it shimmer in front of her before settling back to appear as nothing more than a simple picture. Harry had cast every protective spell and charm known to wizardkind on this picture; it was no wonder it had been spared from the damage. She looked back up at his sleeping face once more. If such a picture of them had meant that much to him, she was finally beginning to see just how true his words had been. He loved her more than she would ever be able to put into words. And she knew that she felt the same for him.

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Healer Maybach carefully ran her wand back and forth over Harry's anxious face. After days of bed rest, he was eager to get up and do something, but the Healers had demanded he stay in bed until cleared by her.

While he felt ok now, he knew that the injuries he'd sustained had been extensive and severe. Denise had told him several times that he was very lucky to even be alive. The damage the house had done while failing on him was mild compared to what his magic had done. Some of the cells in his body had been completely vaporised, and they'd had to regrow them. She had informed him how lucky he was that he'd been out for that. It was a million times more painful and difficult than regrowing bones.

Even now he still felt utterly drained and could tell she wanted to keep him in the hospital. His body was still healing and very susceptible to further damage. "C'mon, Doc," Harry grumbled.

"Don't give me that tone, young man. You were at death's door not so long ago. Let me do my job."

"Fine," he glowered as Hermione laughed behind his back.

Harry continued to grumble under his breath as he had been doing throughout the entire examination. His mood was not improved by the fact that they'd conspired to keep his wand hidden from him since he woke again. He was anxious to get up and move around. But it was still several minutes before Denise finally lowered her wand and stepped back.

"You still need a lot of work and much more bed rest." Harry made to interrupt her but was quickly silenced by her look. "However, if you insist on leaving, I cannot keep you. Just no magical travel for the next few days. Let that body finish healing."

Harry was practically glowing at her words. He was free.

"In fact, no magic of any sort for you until further notice."

The strict look she gave him told Harry that while he could convince her to let him leave, he would never win that argument, so he merely nodded.

"Never fear, Denise. He won't be casting too much without his wand anyway. And I won't let him charm me into telling him where I've hidden it." Hermione chimed in, helping Harry out of bed.

"Very well, off you go," Denise smirked. "And remember to take the potions regularly."

It wasn't until they had gathered all their things and were out on the bustling street that Harry realised the important thing he'd been missing throughout the whole examination.

"Er, Hermione. I know the healers are ok for me to go home, but…"

"Yes?"

"Well, I kind of don't really have a home to go to right now."

He imitated a rickety structure falling over complete with sounds, and Hermione couldn't help the smile that spread over her face at the childish gesture.

"For this, you can stay at my place." She chuckled, hailing a taxi.

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Ron felt his muscles rebel as he stretched as best he could in the limited space he had available. Being curled up on the couch had never been his favourite way to get some rest,

but today it was markedly better. The small blonde witch pressed against his body, softly sleeping, made it so.

He knew it hadn't been her intention. That when she grasped his hand, it had only been her way of letting him know she was there for him. But when he saw her smile, he just knew it was the right thing to do. The kiss had quickly become a lot more, getting wildly out of hand until they were both lying naked on the broken couch, neither caring about the where, only the who and the what.

Ron had always had a soft spot in his heart when it came to Luna, though he never let on to the others for fear that they'd make fun of him. Over the past week, she had shown him he no longer cared what his so-called friends thought, so great had been their need for each other that they had barely even left the couch in days, summoning what food and supplies they needed. *She* had been there for him when he had needed her the most.

And he didn't regret a moment of what he'd shared with her. He glanced about the room, taking in just how much damage he'd caused to the flat before she'd whisked him away. He realised now she had seen right through him and had tricked him into leaving with her to keep his mind off whatever had caused him to behave in such a rash manner.

Looking to the window, he noticed it must have been late afternoon already, as he could hear the neighbour's children playing as their car pulled up and the doors slammed shut.

It was a slight comfort to him that no matter how things fell apart in his own life, the world continued to turn, going about its business.

He chuckled to himself and kissed the blonde girl's forehead before snuggling back down behind her once more, his eyes flickering shut.

"*WHAT THE HELL!?*"

He shot up as he caught sight of the perpetrator. Hermione now stood on the threshold, looking open-mouthed at the state of their shared flat. Anger once more bubbled through Ron as he saw a puzzled Harry standing just behind her.

It was at that moment that their eyes met, and Hermione seemed to notice the elephant in the room.

"Luna?"

Ronald was suddenly acutely aware of his lack of clothing. When he and Luna had finally settled into sleep, they hadn't even sought a blanket to cover themselves, given it was such a lovely warm night. They both lay completely naked to the world, as they had also forgotten Ron had removed his front door several days earlier. In fact, he'd found the light breeze he now realised had come from it quite soothing.

Luna yawned, slowly arching her back up off the couch and catching Hermione's eye. "Oh, hullo Hermione. Harry. How are you this morning?" Not attempting in the slightest to cover her naked chest that was now pointing directly at Hermione.

The anger coursing through Ron since their interruption was instantly replaced by humour as he realised the insanity of his current situation. He and his lover were bare-ass naked on the couch in front of his now ex-girlfriend, and yet Luna was acting like they were sitting down for Sunday brunch.

"Er… confused…" Hermione called back, clearly uncomfortable with just how much of Luna was bared in her direction. "And a little angry." She added as her eyes met Ron's again.

A million bitter retorts flew through his mind at that moment. He wanted to lash out at her, hurt her back as she'd hurt him. Knowing from experience that they were seconds away from a huge argument, Ron found himself experiencing a moment of utter clarity, despite the craziness of the scenario he was confronted with.

"C'mon Luna." He blurted as he wrapped the lithe witch in his arms and disapparated away.

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Harry had never seen Hermione so angry before. She had vaporised the couch within seconds of Ron disapparating. And the swear words. He had often wondered if she were capable of such behaviour, but she was living in his element now, storming back and forth through the broken appliances and furniture, ranting like a madwoman.

He was almost proud of the woman before him now. But knew how embarrassed she'd be in a moment when the neighbours felt the need to come and check on all the noise. He forced himself into her path, still struggling to walk on his own without falling in pain and pulled her yelling form into his arms.

She instantly froze mid-sentence, and he felt her body rippling beneath his touch. He was not entirely sure whether she would hug him back or jinx him, but he was committed now. He couldn't have pulled away if he wanted to. She was as much his physical crutch as he was attempting to be her emotional one.

Without another word, her arms snaked around his waist, and he again felt her tears on his chest.

Harry didn't utter a word as they stood holding each other in the middle of her living room. He knew what she needed right now was just to be held. No words could heal the hurt she felt any better than the warm embrace they were already sharing. He had far too much experience helping her gather herself after arguments with Ron. And he found himself hating his best friend for that.

"I knew it was over." Harry was surprised to hear her voice from his shoulder.

"I'm sorry?"

"The moment I spun to look at you in that sitting room. The look in your eyes. I knew that it was the end of my relationship with Ron."

Harry felt terrible. He hadn't thought that far forward when he'd opened himself up to her. He'd naively thought that somehow Ron would be ok with it. That they'd all just hash it out together and go on being friends forever, as though nothing had changed.

"I didn't want to do this to him either. I just couldn't hold it in any longer, Hermione. It was burning me alive from the inside."

She pulled back far enough to look up into his face. "I know that. And I know I truly love you in return. But to have him do that, in front of me."

Harry tucked her firmly back under his chin as she sobbed against his chest, letting her mourn her lost relationship. And Harry finally saw the full ramifications of those words so long ago now. Not only had he lost Ron, for himself and Hermione, but surely none of the Weasleys would speak to him ever again.

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"*You. Stupid. Thick. Manky. GIT!*"

Ginny emphasised every word by wrapping her rolled-up copy of the Daily Prophet over her brother's head, causing him to cower under her anger. "You…"

"Damnit, Gin, lay off, will you!" He begged, still covering his face from her repeated strikes.

Luna was just dazedly watching as her friend continued to hit Ron with every curse word she could pile on after he had explained what had happened at the flat several weeks prior. It appeared that Ron was hoping for understanding from his sister after her own breakup with Harry, but Ginny had just started yelling and lashed out at him until he was huddled in the corner of the small kitchen.

"*I will not lay off RONALD!* How could you do something like that to her?"

"She hurt me first!" he bellowed back, feeling he could finally regain some ground in their standoff.

"She said she loved her friend! So, you rush home and sleep with someone else as repayment!?"

Luna did feel bad for Ron as he looked like a lost puppy under his sister's furious stares. But she had seen Ginny's fury first-hand too many times to want to be its direct recipient, and for the moment she had remained safe from judgement. She had no desire to hasten the moment when Ginny turned on her as well.

"You didn't hear her, Gin. I've lost her."

"*Well, you certainly bloody have now!*" She yelled, battering him once again with a flurry of slaps.

Apparently feeling she had hammered home her point, Ginny turned away from Ron and plonked heavily down at the table next to Luna. She braced herself for the tirade she was sure

was coming. But Ginny just smiled at her and tapped her hand softly.

"I'm sorry my idiot brother did this to you as well, Luna."

"What?!" Ron screeched as he reached for the table.

Ginny glared roughly back at him as he stepped back again, wary of another round with her wrath.

"After all, I know you told me you had feelings for the wanker, but he could have picked a better way to return them."

Luna had indeed confided in Ginny many times how much she liked her brother, much to Ginny's surprise. She expressed extreme shock that Ron could garner appreciation from more than a single member of the opposite sex, what with his long list of issues. But she had offered her support nonetheless. Ron was looking curiously at Luna as Ginny continued to glare in his direction.

"That's right, Ronald. Luna has been interested in you for years. Shame you are too thick to notice what's right in front of you."

"Would you please give it a rest, Gin?"

"I am hardly going to praise your behaviour, Ronald."

"And will you stop calling me Ronald, Ginev…"

He quickly shut up once again as Ginny made to rise from her seat. "If you had any sort of sense, you'd have known that Harry has been in love with Hermione since your third year. Hell, even I couldn't divert his attention from her. And she has loved him since you forced them together during the Triwizard Tournament by having another one of your little spats."

Luna could remember that short period well. Being Ginny's friend, she had seen the Golden Trio many times around the school and was always amazed at the aura that surrounded them when together. But during those few weeks apart, she truly noticed Ron for the first time. It was when she had first developed feelings for him, so she could see how Hermione could have done the same with Harry.

And now that the truth had come out between them all, the friendship that had seemed so strong was falling apart at the seams. Luna felt somewhat guilty for her part in it all but had no idea how to fix things as they currently stood.

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" Ron grumbled as he sat with them once more at the table, ignoring the looks from his sister across the table.

"It is not the responsibility of everyone around you to teach you to open your eyes, Ronald. You are supposed to be a grown man. Besides, with You-Know-Who and everything, most of us were a little busy surviving to worry about who was dating whom." Ginny growled in return.

"I get it alright," Ron hissed, "I screwed up. Again."

Luna felt terrible as she watched Ron's face fall as reality sank in and he struggled with how to handle it. She shuffled her chair closer to him and took his hand gently in her own, drawing his eyes to her for a moment before they fell to the table once more.

Things were indeed broken, and she didn't have a clue how to go about fixing them.

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Neville growled to himself softly as he departed the grounds. While he was very happy that Harry was back to full strength again, it also meant he had returned to full stubbornness as well. And now that they were openly dating one another for the first time in years, something that should have brought immense relief to their friends, Hermione was fully on side with him in this as well.

Instead of trying to repair their broken friendship with Ron, the two were taking time from their jobs to rebuild Harry's home instead. With the brilliant witch's assistance, the new structure was already looking even more impressive than the one Harry had initially constructed.

But why could he not get either one to listen to reason? He knew that Ginny had eventually calmed down after she had learned Ron's part in everything and was trying to make her brother see sense, but that left Neville to tackle the truly stubborn pair in this fight.

If they could be in love with one another for over a decade and yet refuse to acknowledge it, he wondered just how long the two of them could hold this grudge if they were united in their desire to do so. Months he'd been at it now, trying to get them to see reason. But not a single argument he'd brought forth had swayed them in the slightest.

At first, it had seemed they might come to their senses naturally. The anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts had brought them together in public, where they would be forced to interact. But Neville had been naive. They had looked to the world to be agreeable enough not to make the headlines, but the moment they were out of the public eye, the bickering began.

The handful of family events the four had been forced to attend together in the months since then had not gone any better. If anything, the lack of a press presence had allowed things to go even worse. It was driving him up the wall to see his friends being so stupid.

He glanced up at the timber skeleton of the house and sighed. Never had he faced such a daunting challenge as the one that lay before him now.

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Harry smiled openly at the sight before him as the hovering saw moved back and forth through the long timber beam. The frame of the house was almost completed, and in half the time it had taken the first time around. While Hermione had been easier to convince than

Kreacher to try building it the muggle way, she had of course come up with ways of doing so that still incorporated magic.

Which had greatly improved their efficiency. Something the pair had always been good at together. His eyes flicked from the saw to the witch controlling it, her hair pulled back and tied up to keep it out of the way. There were spots of grime and sawdust on her cheeks, and her clothes were dirty and ratty too, though they'd already been that way before she chose them for the task they were put to here.

But more than that, he noticed her glow. One he knew he shared. Now that they were fully open and honest with one another, now that they could share their love openly, the pair had never been happier. Simply spending time with each other, something they'd done for years, now held new meaning.

Whether they were sitting in silence as Hermione read another book, or passionately snogging away the afternoon, every moment together was just as precious and special as the next. Harry had even stopped caring that they had wasted so much time apart and had come to instead cherish every moment they had now.

"Stop staring at me and give me a hand, Harry," Hermione smirked, glancing in his direction as the piece of shortened timber floated over to where it needed to be fitted.

Harry extended his empty hand to her, and she rolled her eyes at his cheeky behaviour. He laughed to himself as he walked over to the freshly cut beam and lifted it into place, pulling his humming wand from his pocket.

Ever since his accident, he'd felt far more in touch with his magic, and his wand had seemed to resonate with it every time he touched it. He focused his mind on the nails in his tool belt and felt them lift up into the air, and with a light flick of his wand, all four shot into the timber, pinning the end into place.

He smiled at how fine his control had become in the past months as he recovered from the accident. A pair of familiar arms wrapped about his body from behind and a pair of even more familiar lips pressed to his neck. Harry leaned back into the figure of his fiancée and allowed the sensation to flow through him.

"You look so sexy when you do that." Hermione hummed into his ear.

"Pot, kettle," Harry replied, turning in her arms and slinking his own around her back, pulling her closer so he could ravage her soft lips. "Who'd have thought paint-covered, ripped jeans and shirts could look that appealing?"

One of Hermione's arms came free, and Harry smiled at her as he felt the movement in her shoulder before her hand came to rest with a resounding smack against his left butt cheek. "Who indeed?"

"I love you, Hermione," Harry stated, his eyes locked onto her own.

No matter how many times he said it, it had lost none of the magic, and he delighted in watching the spark it lit in her eyes every single time.

"And I love you, Harry. But it is supposed to rain tonight, and we've got seven more of these to get into place."

"Then maybe someone should stop distracting me every five minutes."

"Please, you distract yourself."

"Nuh-uh, it's this," his hands slid lower and cupped Hermione's firm bum, "magnificent bottom that keeps distracting me."

Hermione wiggled into his hands and smiled at him, biting her lip seductively as she did. "Is that so?"

Harry leaned in and captured her lips again, letting his entire being flood with the joy that it brought him as she reciprocated his love and affection equally. In moments like these, it was easy to feel like all was right with the world, even after his regular visit from Neville trying to get them all to repair the broken friendship.

Harry felt a little bad about how he kept brushing off Neville, but was soon distracted from it once more as Hermione deepened the kiss they were sharing, and all rational thought left him. If heaven were a place on earth, he had found it in Hermione.

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Neville sat silently between the beds, watching the quietly sleeping figures as his mind washed over the issue. Both problems seemed equally insurmountable at the moment. Both sides of the more recent problem were being equally as stubborn and pigheaded.

His mother stirred slightly, rolling in the bed, and Neville stopped thinking as he watched. Every time he saw such a simple human moment, he could not prevent himself from hoping that maybe this time, they would open their eyes and recognise him once more. A hope that was dashed whenever they did awaken and he saw nothing in their eyes. A hope that wasn't tested on this particular occasion as she remained asleep.

Neville sighed to himself, disappointed in what he felt was him continuing to fail his parents. In the years since he had graduated, he had travelled a lot, searching for something that might reverse his parents' conditions. But he'd found nothing so far. And he was failing to continue his family line as he was sure his father would want, ignoring dating opportunities of his own to seek out a new lead or to try and soothe the broken state of his other friend's situation.

A cough from his father drew Neville's eye, and he saw the man's hand reaching across the gap he was seated in, an action that his mother seemed to mirror in her sleep as well. Neville felt tears welling in his eyes as he watched them both reach out for one another. He was sure this indicated that both of them were still there somewhere deep inside. He just needed to get them to come back out again.

His eyes flicked back and forth between the beds, and he froze as his mind tracked another thought. A fleeting thing that he had to focus to catch and pin down. An idea that might solve at least one of his problems. As he ran over the idea in his mind, it solidified, taking shape until he was sure it would work. If he could get Ginny's help again.

He shuffled his chair forward and took the two outstretched hands in his own, finding comfort in the gentle grip each gave against his touch. "Thanks, mum. Thanks, Dad. We'll fix them up. Then we'll fix you as well."

He smiled to himself as he stood and headed for the nurse's station to make the arrangements. If they wouldn't come to reason on their own, he would force them to.

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Harry trudged through the halls, Hermione's hand gripped firmly in his own. Despite being a regular visitor himself, he still hated coming to the hospital. But the message Ginny had delivered had made it sound urgent that they attend. And not in a good way.

His eyes flicked to Hermione, and he could see the sympathy within her brown eyes as she urged him forward. In this, she couldn't quite sympathise. Since she had recovered her parents from Australia a few years prior, their relationship had only grown stronger. This was one area where only Neville seemed to truly understand Harry's pain.

The pair rounded the corner and saw the long, striking red hair of the girl pacing back and forth in front of the door Harry knew to be their destination. Ginny spun on her heel to track back and caught sight of them immediately, rushing forward to meet them both, pulling them into a hug that Harry gingerly returned, softly patting the girl on the back.

"I'm glad you both agreed to come. Neville is inside." She whispered as she stepped back, her face flicking quickly from one to the other.

"What's going on, Ginny?" Hermione asked. "Your message was incredibly vague."

"Neville will explain. Please." Ginny gestured for them both to enter the room, and Harry moved forward, intent on helping Neville through whatever struggle he was dealing with.

His eyes barely had time to register the few bodies standing over by the beds when the door behind him suddenly closed loudly. Harry spun to look over his shoulder, noting Hermione doing the same. Ginny smiled at them both through the door-lite as she stepped back and sat cross-legged against the wall opposite them. She slowly pulled four wands from her coat and laid them out on the floor facing her.

Harry recognised all four of the wands and his free hand patted the area where he normally kept his own, finding it empty. A glance at Hermione as she tried to force the now sealed door open confirmed that the one he had registered as hers had been unknowingly taken from her as well.

But it was the other two that most annoyed Harry. He could handle being tricked by a friend; that wasn't what had his temper flaring, it was the fact that he knew when he turned around

he would see a face he really didn't want to right now. And that Neville had used their mutual pain to achieve this meeting.

Harry slowly turned, catching Hermione's eye as he moved before their gaze broke and his eyes flicked to the beds that took up most of the space in the private room. Neville stood between the beds, looking both solemn and guilty at the same time. Good, Harry thought, at least he knew he had done something wrong here. But Harry's eye did not stop at Neville; it drifted past the man on the bed behind his friend and found the tiny blonde smiling lightly at him, as she ever did.

Harry felt a little guilty himself at her smile. Luna had always been good to him, even in his worst moments. And even now, when he was intentionally distancing himself from her for Hermione's sake, she still didn't seem to hold it against him. He wondered briefly if there was anything he could do that would make the wonderful person that Luna was hate him, but he quickly shook it off, knowing he'd rather walk himself to death again than hurt someone as pure as Luna.

His gaze, at last, flicked to the final figure in the room and it was exactly as he had expected. Ron was glaring at the pair of them, his face quickly reddening, an explosion imminent. Harry noted that while he was now looking directly at the man he had once considered his closest friend, Ron's gaze was fixed somewhere between his own and Hermione's faces. As though he couldn't decide who to be madder at, or in a desire not to look directly at either one.

"Thank you for coming." Neville opened, drawing the attention of the room, if not the gaze.

"You tricked us, Neville." Hermione clipped back, Harry noting the effort in her voice not to directly attack their mutual friend.

"Yes, I did. And I'm very sorry to you, Harry. But I'm also pissed off at you as well." This finally tore Harry's gaze from Ron back to Neville, the confusion he felt evident on his face now. "I thought of everyone here; you would understand the pain, but you're still letting it go on."

"What are you…?" Harry asked, only to be cut off.

"Yeah, you see. It is their fault. I told you." Ron growled.

"Quiet, Ronald." Luna chastised, gently gripping his hand and drawing his hurt gaze to her little form. He had clearly expected her to back him up, not shush him.

"It's all of your damn faults. And it's none of your faults." Neville continued as though he hadn't been interrupted. "And, frankly, I'm getting sick of it."

Several of the warring friends moved to talk, but Neville quickly cut them off. "No, you don't. Not here. This is Longbottom territory, and you lot are going to bloody well listen to me now." His voice climbed slightly as the anger began to be evident in his voice. "You're hurting. We all get it. But enough is enough. The people in this room are my family. I'm sick of seeing my family in pain."

Harry tried to remain stoic, but he felt the tears welling behind his eyes. He truly understood Neville's pain there. How one who has lost their real family finds people that they choose to make their family, to fill the absence left in their soul. He had done the same with the Weasleys and gathered other new people into his family over time as well.

"Don't get me wrong. Gran was great, but I saw what I was missing every holiday. When I got to Hogwarts, I felt so alone for the first time. But you lot made it a little easier to bear. I know you all thought me a bit useless to begin with, and I was." His voice rose even higher here, and Harry knew he was cutting them all off before they could rebut his argument. "I was. But my *family* helped me get past that, helped me to become the man I am today. The man I know these two would be proud of."

He turned to face the bed with his father on it, the man looking up at him contentedly, as though he had not a care in the world and no idea what was being discussed in the room. He even smiled when Neville looked at him, and the man faltered for a moment. Harry wanted so badly to walk over to him, to offer some level of comfort as he often did when Neville asked him to visit his parents. But a quick glimpse at the other couple in the room stayed his intention.

"How do you think you would feel if something horrible happened tomorrow, Ron?" Neville's eyes jumped from his father to the redhead who seemed startled to suddenly be the centre of attention in the room. "How did you feel when you thought Harry was dead under all that rubble? What if that happened again? Or an attack by what's left of the Death Eaters was to leave one of you dead? And you never resolved this stupid argument."

Ron went a different shade of red now, one Harry knew meant he was feeling ashamed but wouldn't voice why. Harry too felt the sting of Neville's words. He had felt exactly that before. He had wanted to say so many things to so many people before he had walked into the forest alone all those years earlier. But he held his tongue so he wouldn't lose his nerve. His eyes flicked to the woman beside him and a small smile snuck onto his face. And so Hermione wouldn't tie him down and prevent him from going. Even back then, his heart knew what his brain hadn't figured out yet.

"You don't know how hard it is to sit by the bed of your biological family, unable to help them while you listen to your chosen family rip itself apart." Neville now focused on his mother, who also smiled at him blankly, as though the action was ingrained in her to the point of being automatic, even though they all knew the woman within had no idea why she was doing such a thing. "I'm sick of it. It ends today."

"Look, Nev…" Ron started but stopped instantly when Neville turned on him.

Neville had changed so very much from the night they had gone looking for the Philosopher's Stone. Gone was the timid child who struggled to stand up to them. Here was a man who stood proudly in front of Voldemort and told the dark wizard to go to hell.

"You look. Your petty argument is affecting more than just yourselves. You're hurting; we get it. GET OVER IT! Everybody hurts sometimes. Friends and family get past that."

"It's not that simple, Neville," Hermione whispered, her voice still carrying in the quiet room.

"Yes, it is. You are making it harder than it needs to be. After all you lot have been through, you're going to let something as wonderful as love rip you apart?"

Harry's guilt built higher than ever. He had known this was possible when he confessed his feelings to Hermione all those long months ago. She initially refused him to avoid exactly this outcome. And the pain he had caused was spreading. His thoughts were interrupted by a hand gripping his own tighter than before, and he turned to see Hermione staring at him, a knowing eyebrow raised. Harry blushed under her gaze, having been caught out spiralling once more.

Hermione let him go and stepped further into the room, highlighting to Harry that the pair had never stepped beyond the threshold. She made the distance quickly, joining Neville by Mrs Longbottom's bed, the woman gently reaching out for his hand as it hovered above the covers, her bright smile ever-present.

Hermione laid her hand on the man's shoulder, but he did not turn from his mother's gaze. "I'm sorry, Neville. We never meant to hurt anyone, least of all our friends. Our family." The man turned at her comment. "But I just don't think that I can forgive and forget right now."

Neville's face hardened slightly, and Harry moved forward to join Hermione, his hand gently closing about her upper arm. "She's right. But I promise we'll think about what you said."

Neville nodded softly, and Harry glanced over at the other two. Both looked about how he felt, thoroughly chastised. Though the moment Ron realised he was looking, his face began to colour once more. Harry sighed to himself and tightened his grip on Hermione's arm. He needed some air after this discussion. He gathered himself and closed his eyes, and with a swirl of magic, he and Hermione departed the ward with a crack.

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Ron stomped in circles about Luna's living room, the tiny girl watching his progress as he would occasionally spin on his heel and head the other way, still completing circuits of the round space. His eyes would occasionally flick over some of the odd decorations, but his mind was definitely still sitting back at St Mungo's, even though it had been hours since they left.

"Ronald?" Luna asked, drawing his eye for a moment.

"I can't believe this." He grumbled, continuing his movements through the space as Luna watched him go. "They as much as admitted it was their fault and everyone's still on my case to just forget it all. Like they didn't betray my trust."

"That wasn't what Neville said."

"'Course it was." He snapped back, his mind replaying the moment when Harry and Hermione sauntered into the room earlier. He wanted to curse both of them, but hadn't noticed his sister had relieved him of his wand until it was too late. "Forgive and forget. Bah. I gave her my heart, and she stomped all over it."

"Ronald," Luna replied softly.

"Don't Ronald me! I have a right to be angry."

"Yes, you do. And so do they. No one is innocent in this mess."

"So you're going to side with them too?" He growled, hurt by the very idea.

"I'm not taking anyone's side, but if I were, I'm here with you, am I not? All of us have done and said some pretty nasty things lately. This is not what it's supposed to be like to have friends. Friends forgive one another. They support one another."

"Friends don't go and confess their love for another friend behind the first friend's back!"

"Friends also don't sleep with another friend because they're angry at the friend they are dating. We're not the innocent wronged party here, Ronald. We hurt them too. And I feel terrible about it every day."

Ron swiped at the air in Luna's direction, resuming his circuit of the living space. He didn't reply to that because even in his anger, he knew it was true. He had lashed out and used Luna to do it when he heard Hermione confess her love for Harry. It had felt good at the time but had since become a weight in his stomach. He wanted to be justified in his anger, but people wouldn't stop pointing out his own mistakes in this affair.

"They still love you, Ron. And you them." Luna's voice came from the silence eventually.

He glared at her darkly. How did she always know which button to push? It was like she could read his thoughts sometimes, and it drove him mad. Sometimes a bloke just needs to be angry for a while. To blow off some steam.

"I don't…" He hissed.

Luna gave a heavy sigh as she stood and walked over to him. "Yes, you do. That is why it hurts so badly. No one can hurt you so deeply as the ones we love."

"Enough with the cheesy lines, Luna."

She sighed again and laid her hand gently on his shoulder. His eyes fixed on it, and he really wanted to throw it off. "Take some time. I think you need some space to consider things. I'll leave you to it for now."

She gave him the infuriatingly understanding smile as she pulled her hand away, his shoulder rolling automatically, and he saw the sliver of hurt in her eyes as he did. She moved to speak again, but refrained and simply pulled her wand, walking over to the door and glancing back at him for a moment before apparating away and leaving him alone at last.

Ron resumed his path through the house, his footsteps heavy with anger as he swept back and forth, dwelling on the events and pain of the past few months.

Hermione sat cautiously in her seat at the enormous table. It had been months since Neville had tricked them into visiting his parents and given them his stern talking-to, and yet she still felt nervous visiting with the Weasleys. Ginny caught her eye from the head of the table and smiled, the birthday girl winking at her as she did, and Hermione gave a forced smile.

Most of the Weasleys had given her and Harry odd looks today, and she was sure it had more to do with the lack of yelling that had occurred so far than anything else.

As Arthur flicked his wand and the dessert dishes danced their way into the kitchen, most of the family began to sit back and chatter amongst themselves quietly. Hermione flicked her eyes to the redhead seated furthest from her one more time, and she felt Harry's hand squeeze her own in encouragement. She wanted him with her for this, but they had decided both of them would seem too confrontational. And at the heart of it, she had been the one to truly hurt Ron.

She stood and walked to the end of the table, every eye turning to track her and a collective tension built as she approached the end of the table. The petite blonde smiled at her as she approached, and the ginger sitting beside her turned to face Hermione for the first time since they had arrived.

"Hello, Ron. Can I have a word, please?" She asked softly, but was sure that even Ginny heard it at the far end of the table, so quiet had they all become.

Ron took a deep breath before he nodded, Luna gently touching his shoulder as he stood and pointed out around the side of the wonky house, heading towards the orchard. Silence and stares followed the two as they walked around the house and out of view, not that any distance on the property would be sufficient to keep them from hearing if this went badly.

As Hermione gathered her courage to begin, she noticed Ron appeared ready to speak, so she launched her own out first, cutting him off before he could begin. "I'm sorry, Ron."

He cocked his head in her direction, his eyes watching her quietly for a moment before his mouth opened again. "Me too. Sorry, that is."

"None of this should have ever happened, but I was too cowardly to address things back before it became a problem. Harry still thinks it's all his fault for confessing to me, but he was right. I've loved him since at least our fifth year at Hogwarts. He has loved me even longer than that, but thanks to how the Dursleys raised him, he didn't realise what it was until it was too late in his mind."

Ron looked like he wanted to say something, but he bit his tongue as she turned and sat on the wobbly fence around the trees arrayed in haphazard rows on the far side.

"It's still hard to get him to talk about it properly, but he thinks he fell for me during the Tournament. That he first felt the way he does now when he opened the portrait hole on the first, and I was standing there with a pile of toast, ready to listen. Ready to help."

"Of course…" Ron mumbled, and Hermione's eyes flicked up to him.

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to have a go, Ron. You know what Harry is like. Couple the fact he had no idea what he was feeling with you beginning to show an appreciation for the fact I was a girl and you have a Harry Potter classic. Whatever he felt for me, he convinced himself that it was nothing more than friendship. And I think he knew, even then, that in the end of everything… He would have to die."

Ron's face widened for a moment as she paused. "What do you mean?"

"I doubt it was something concrete, just a feeling really. Maybe it was the inevitability of it more than anything. He was in danger once again due to Voldemort." Hermione smiled inwardly as she noted Ron no longer flinched at the name. "He could feel the sword circling, swaying over his head, and he forced his feelings to comply with what he 'knew' was coming."

"So he stepped aside to prevent either of us from being hurt?"

"Can you think of anything more Harry than that?"

Ron nodded as his thoughts drifted once again. "No, that is classic Harry."

"I think, and this is what I am most sorry to you for, that I knew it too. As soon as I saw his face after we got back from the Department of Mysteries. There was something different there. A resignation. We later learned that's when Dumbledore told him about the prophecy. After Sirius had died. I'm still mad at him for that. Putting that on Harry when he was grieving like that."

Ron stepped towards her but stopped, and Hermione realised he had been moving to comfort her, even after everything that had transpired. She smiled up at him, and he blushed. "None of this excuses any of what we put you through, though. I just feel you have a right to know the full truth of it. Once I realised it, even if I wasn't acknowledging it to myself, I tried to forget what I felt now that I knew what it was. And I resigned myself to the next best thing."

Hermione cringed as the words left her mouth and she tried not to look up at what she was sure was a quickly reddening face. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for it to…"

"No, you're right. I am not as good as Harry. We all know it." Ron looked angry once more, and Hermione was very much regretting her phrasing.

"You aren't, though. You are a great friend. You stuck with Harry through a lot that would have sent others running for the hills. Aragog, for starters. You faced your worst fear on the promise of information that might help Harry, might help me. You stared down what you thought to be a mass murderer on a broken leg because you wanted to protect Harry.

"You aren't the second-best Harry Potter. You are the best Ron Weasley. And you deserve someone who will treat you that way. Apparently, I can't, and the both of us would have suffered for my failing for the rest of our lives. I do love you, Ron, but not the way that I should. Not the way you deserve."

Ron stood silently, looking away from her, out over the open fields beside the property. Unable to see his face, Hermione fell silent, allowing him to digest what she had just told him.

"I know. I always knew. I saw the way the two of you were together. The longer things went on, the more it felt like Harry Potter and Hermione Granger against the world, with Ron Weasley trailing along for the ride. I had some good moments, sure, but they were all from our first couple of years. The more stuff we endured, the more you both gravitated together. Sure, Harry spent more time with me, but when he needed something, he always turned to you."

Ron turned to face her once more, and she saw the anguish in his expression. "And I know it's awful, but I felt superior the day you chose me for the first time. That I was finally better than him at something. I hate myself for feeling like that. For being more upset that I lost you to Harry than the fact that I lost you in the first place."

"Please don't. You are allowed to feel things, Ron. That's what all of this stems from. We cannot change how we feel, and if we're really friends with someone, we shouldn't ask them to. I don't want you to feel bad for the way you feel, just as I hope you are coming to accept I can't change who I feel things for."

"I don't blame you for that. I was angry at how I found out. Let's be honest, we both knew the truth a long time ago. I already felt like a voyeur listening in on you both while you were vulnerable like that. And then I hear you say that before ever talking to me about how things had changed…"

"That was the problem, for me, things never changed. I just finally admitted the truth to myself. All it took was Harry nearly dying again for me to sort myself out."

A quiet fell between them for several long minutes again as Hermione considered all the pair had just shared.

Ron surprised her when he spoke once more. "I really am sorry for what I did. No matter what happened between us, you didn't deserve that. I ruined the flat and put Luna in an awkward position with two of the people she trusted most. I think she was exactly the person I needed to get over you. You know how she has this way of making you look at things differently. Or just plain confusing you around to seeing her point."

The pair chuckled at the unique nature of their mutual blonde friend. "Luna is special, that's for sure."

"Anyway… I think I might still need some space, but I am coming to terms with it all. Hopefully, we can all be friends again someday?" Ron asked, his voice delicate and hopeful at the end as he glanced up at Hermione.

"Of course, Ron. Someday soon."

Hermione glanced back towards the house to see a familiar dark-haired head peeking around the side of the haphazard structure, and she smiled.

Harry glanced happily around the room at the gathered figures within, all chattering and laughing with one another. Just about every person he knew on a personal level filled the enormous space that had once been the site of the most painful moment of his life. Today would go a long way towards correcting that.

His eyes flicked to some of the closer figures. Most of the Weasley family were sitting on the nearby couches, Neville and long-time girlfriend Hannah chatting amicably with Arthur while the others listened and occasionally chimed in. Behind them, Luna was twirling in a small circle in the arms of the large wild Kiwi man named Mike she had returned from her trip to Australia with. While he might look intimidating, Harry quickly learned the man was just a great big teddy bear, so alike to Hagrid that he was surprised the pair weren't gleefully chatting about some enormous dangerous beast they wanted to tame.

Harry was glad she was happy after the quiet split with Ron a few months prior. The thought drew his eyes to the other side of the room where his once closest friend was standing by another newer face in Harry's life. Danielle was once more showing off the sparkling ring on her finger to any and all who would listen as she recounted Ron's proposal for the fourteenth time by Harry's count. Ron noticed him looking and smiled his way, a smile that Harry easily returned.

Things were never going to be the same as their time back at Hogwarts, but the group were definitely moving past the issues that had once brought this house crashing down around Harry's ears. He had been surprised when Ron had informed him that he and Luna were going their separate ways, assuming that the pair would be getting married at some point with how happy they had seemed together. Ron had implied that Luna had always known she was his rebound girl and that eventually, they had seen the truth that they too would not last a lifetime as a couple. He was pleased they had managed to do so far better than his own efforts in love had been on those around him.

Last, but certainly not least, as his eyes traversed the room, he saw Ginny questioning Hermione quietly in the centre of the space. The brunette's eyes flicked to his own, and he felt the question in them. He wandered towards them and he could, at last, hear the conversation as Ginny asked.

"So… housewarming?" She directed at Harry as he stepped behind Hermione and gently wrapped his arms about her stomach, holding her close as he looked at Ginny over his wife's shoulder, applying a soft kiss to her warm cheek. "Bit late for that, wouldn't you say? You told me that you finished the last tweaks to this place three months ago."

Harry smiled at her and noticed Hermione glance at him out of the corner of her eye. "You're right. What do you think?" He asked Hermione.

She smiled and tapped her glass of sparkling water with her fingernails, sending a high-pitched sound through the room that drew the attention of their guests to the snuggled pair. Ginny smirked knowingly, and Harry knew the nosy girl had ferreted out the truth of their current gathering.

"Everyone, thank you for coming to our home. Harry and I welcome each and every one of you. We think of you all as family, and so we wanted to share our home and our news with you." Hermione paused as she glanced at Harry again, his hands rubbing softly at her stomach as she spoke. "As some of you may have guessed, the housewarming was a bit of a ruse. Who has a housewarming a quarter of a year after they move in, right?"

The gathered members chuckled at her words, and Hermione continued. "What we really asked you all here to celebrate is our first child. We're having a baby."

Silence descended for a moment before cheers and congratulations filled the air. Molly quickly stood from her place beside Arthur and rushed towards them, pulling both of her practically adopted children into her arms together.

"Oh, I am so happy for you both. This is wonderful news. We have so much to do…" She trailed off as she stepped back, and Ginny gently guided her to the side with a wink back at the parents-to-be, Molly still chattering to herself about knitting up some gear for the wee tyke as soon as possible.

Luna was next to swish up to them, leading Harry to believe she never stopped dancing with Mike as she swung out from his arms and also wrapped the pair into a firm hug. "That's wonderful. Some children to start filling this enormous house."

"Thank you, Luna."

She gave Hermione's cheek a gentle kiss as she pulled away and smiled at the pair brightly. "Mike and I might be trying for our own soon too."

Harry gave a soft laugh at the look on Mike's face as he glanced at Luna's friends. He seemed more worried they might hex him for deflowering their little Luna than anything.

"That would be wonderful, Luna." He offered, winking at Mike, who quickly stretched out his hand and shook theirs.

Harry was surprised to see Danielle fill the space as Luna led Mike away, chatting to him softly.

"That is incredible. We're so happy for you two." Danielle almost shrieked. "Do you know the sex yet? Have you planned…"

"Let them breathe, love," Ron instructed from her side, glancing at the pair. "She's right though; we are very happy for you both."

He too offered a hand, and Harry shook it firmly. Things would never be completely smooth between the friends again, but they were definitely still getting better. "Thanks, Ron. It means a lot that you're here."

Ron took Hermione's hand and shook it briefly as well, as Harry's hands returned to her belly, gently caressing their growing child within, happier than he'd been in a very long time.

The End

End Notes

A/N: My first post here on FanFiction.lol is one of the fics that took me the longest to write. I started jotting this down in a notebook during breaks on job sites way back, as a lowly apprentice electrician. And then took a decade to actually finish writing it and post it to AO3.

Now, it gets to be the opening salvo of me cross-posting my works here as well. And as such, it has gotten a proper overhaul too. So if you notice some differences from the FFN and AO3 versions, that is why. I'll probably copy the changes over to those eventually as well. And all the other works will get a touch-up as they go up too.

Not sure how long it will take. So if there is a story you are hanging out for, my apologies for making you wait. As it is, this one alone took most of the afternoon to transfer over, and it's just a simple one-shot. Elfish and Glastonbury are going to be monumental efforts to shift over without the ability to simply edit on AO3 and copy the code over. So please be patient, and feel free to let me know what you think.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!