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Number Games

Chapter One

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"With all the hype around today's championship match between the heavily favored Falmouth Falcons and the surprising Chudley Cannons swirling, the biggest story has to be can the aging backup keeper, Ron Weasley, hold it together for what might be the final game in his career? That's the question on the minds of everyone in the stadium and those watching across the globe."

I block out the sound of the wireless and keep dressing. Most of the team is already out on the pitch warming up while I spent the last few minutes being lathered in salves. I smell like cauldron scrapings. Maybe if the wind is blowing the right way, the stink will keep the chasers from getting too close.

The man in the mirror looks a tad too old for my tastes. The brilliant head of red hair still remains, but I've been dyeing it for years. My agent tells me that "grey and distinguished" might work when I retire, but I (and more importantly she) can't afford to lose another sponsor.

She also tells me to quit shagging girls half my age. According to her, it's bad for my image. Actually, what's bad for my image is hooking up with some saggy-breasted, unhappy witch or Muggle and seeing what she looks like in the morning when her charms or makeup have worn off. Why mess around with that when there's a perky little model with a whole lot less mileage just as willing to hop in the sack with me?

I really should fire her and get a different agent, but since Alicia is married to my brother, that would probably cost me even more on those rare occasions I show up to Mum's for dinner with the family. It's not worth the hassle and I'd lose the Wheeze's endorsement to boot.

Adjusting my pads with a flick of my wand, I get them nice and snug and verify the strength of the charms on them. Popping the seal on the potion the team physician left for me, I suck the sludge down in one gulp. It tastes bloody awful, but it's better than getting a case of back spasms while stretching to block a quaffle on the high side of ring three.

"Now, with an insight into what Weasley must be thinking, let's bring in our own Hall of Fame keeper and two time Guthrie trophy winner, Oliver Wood."

"Great," I mutter. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to listen to that prick, today. Who did the lightening charm on his fat arse so he could get up into the broadcast booth? The only way he could stop a quaffle these days is if they wedged his body into one hoop and bribed the other team's chasers to throw at him."

"Weasley came into the league just a few years after me and was the my backup keeper on both our English National Teams that won the World Cup, but that was almost twenty years ago and I think the game has passed him by. He was a midseason signee for desperate Chudley after their starting keeper got caught up in an off the field scandal and played sparingly during the season. With backup Devlin Hackett going down with a shattered pelvis in last weeks semi-finals against Holyhead, Weasley was pressed into service and did just enough to stop the Harpies' rally before Danica Turpin came away with the golden snitch and put an end to idea of a Falmouth-Holyhead rematch."

"What does Weasley need to do today, Oliver, for Chudley to have any hope of winning?"

"Outside of finding the fountain of youth? I can't rightly say, Calvin. Through his career, Weasley has always relied on his long arms and athleticism to compensate for his flawed mechanics, difficulties recognizing the opposing team's formation, and poor lateral motion on a broom."

"You forgot to mention the time you caught me in bed with your first wife, Wood. She never complained about my mechanics or my lateral motion you sanctimonious piece of ..."

"You sound almost as bitter as Wood does, mate," a familiar voice behind me interrupts.

I turn and face the one and only, Harry Potter. He got out of the game on his own terms ten years ago, lucky git. "Oi, who let the rabble in?"

He smiles and says, "As much as I hate playing the celebrity card, occasionally it comes in handy. Figured I'd stop by and wish you good luck." He crinkles his nostrils. "Did someone forget to vanish the bins?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'd rather smell like shit during the game than feel like it afterwards. How's Ginny and the kids?"

"Good. They're up in the sky box with the rest of the clan. Hermione's even here."

I am somewhat surprised my ex is here. The kids probably made her come. "Did they take her wand at the gate? Otherwise, I'll have to worry about getting my bits hexed off in addition to Falmouth's beaters."

"She promised to behave and Todd's with her too. Although they're probably rooting for Vic." Harry somehow found a way to stay friends with us both. It was probably good training for his position as ICW Ambassador at Large to the Muggles.

Her second husband is a decent chap. According to the kids, they hardly ever row like we did. “True, our last kid is out of Hogwarts. She’s out of reasons to drag me back into court and take more money.” Our friendship lasted seven years, our marriage six, the divorce has lasted longer than both combined. The bitter feelings would outdue all three.

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“Get your no good, lying, cheating arse out of here!” My wife’s one arm held our youngest. The other held a thick stack of moving pictures.

“Come on Hermione, it’s not what it looks like?” Actually it was exactly what it looked like, but that was the first thing that came to mind.

“The paparazzi offered me the first chance to buy them. You want to know why I did it? Because Alicia’s renegotiating your contract and she and Charlie need the money she’ll make as your agent. I’m tired of turning a blind eye while you’re traveling.” She wagged the pictures at me like some Ministry proclamation. “I’ve already spoken to my lawyer. You don’t have a leg to stand on, but I just want to know one thing, Ron – why? That’s all, tell me why you couldn’t keep your dick in your trousers?”

I was busted. I could’ve claimed polyjuice or even that the groupie slipped me a love potion, but I didn’t. Looking back, maybe I’d been wanting to get caught so I could finally be free and clear of all this. So, I smiled at her and shrugged. “You’ve always had the answers to everything, Hermione. You figure it out.”

She dropped the pictures and went for her wand. I apparated out of there before it cleared her holster.

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“Still with me, Ron? You know you’ve got a game in a few minutes.”

I shake my head and say, “Yeah Harry, I was just thinking.”

“Little late in life to start that now,” he quips.

“Har, har good thing you never tried standup comedy, brother. I’m just glad you did right by Ginny.”

“You were a perfect example of what not to do.”

“Well, as long as someone learned from my mistakes, I guess it’s all good.”

There was that period, just after the divorce where Harry avoided me. It was a long year, but when we both ended up on the English National Team, we had a few pints and ironed things out. It wasn’t like I was cheating on him and with the divorce finalized, I wasn’t even cheating on Hermione anymore either. Back in those days, I’d been a kid in a candy store. Everything was in my grasp and tasted so sweet.

Harry picks up my Thresher and inspects it, “This makes that old Firebolt Sirius bought me look like something you’d charm to sweep the hallway.”

“What ever happened to that broom?”

“I donated it. It’s part of a traveling Quidditch museum moving from city to city. With the live feed to the Muggles, there’ll likely be almost a quarter of a billion people watching you today ... no pressure, eh?”

Shrugging, I answer, “Having a one track mind has its advantages. I only have to keep an eye on one quaffle and two bludgers. Everyone else can bugger off until someone gets the snitch.”

Harry laughs, he’s earned his happiness and I’m glad for him.

“C’mon, I’ll walk you out through the tunnel. It’ll be like old times.”

“Nah, everybody’d just be cheering for you, Harry. Hell, Danica would pee her pants if she knew you were in our locker room right now. Actually, screw it. Let’s hear ‘em scream their lungs out.”

In the midst of one of our biggest rows, Hermione had said that I’d “spent my life trying and failing to get out of Harry’s shadow.” She was always good at coming up with stinging one-liners. Other than the National teams, we’d never played for the same club and were never really in direct competition against each other. He was the first to congratulate me the year I’d won the Guthrie trophy for best Keeper in the league.

After all this time, I’ve reached the conclusion that my brother-in-law cast a pretty mean shadow and if history only mentions me as his sidekick at Hogwarts and a guy who played Keeper in the pros for twenty-seven seasons, that’s probably more fame than most get.

I pull the strap on my helmet tight. “How do I look?”

“Like a winner,” he says. “Go on out there and show them that you’ve still got it.”

Thumping him on the back, we start down the long corridor to the field. “Nah mate, I took some potions. That cleared ‘it’ up rather nicely.”

He starts to laugh and is in the middle of telling me that I might be able to fall back on stand up comedy when I hang up the pads, but freezes in mid-sentence. His wand is out in a flash and he trains it at a section of the wall. Damn those reflexes! He’s definitely still got “it.”

The section moves and I see the shimmer of a disillusionment charm disappearing under Harry's magic. It's a young boy with blond hair, too young to have cast the spell. "Easy, mister. I was just trying to get an autograph."

He holds out a team photo, taken before I was added to the roster, and a perma-quill. Harry relaxes and says, "Young man, you need to think a little more before you do things. You're lucky I didn't hex you."

"Mister Weasley, would you please sign it for me?"

I grab the quill and drew a crude stick figure at the end of a row and sign my name above it. "So, you're a Cannons fan."

"All my life," the boy replies and hesitates for a second. "What smells?"

"Reminds me of someone I used to know," Harry says nudging me and trying to hold back his laughter. He's talking about me naturally, but the boy reminds me of someone else.

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With my banged up shoulder, I couldn't go out and practice, but Licia and the National Team's PR department set up this meet and greet autograph signing with a few of us at the new quidditch shop in Diagon Alley. The others would portkey out before practice started, but I was stuck here all day. My sister-in-law seemed to think it would keep me out of trouble. Somehow, I always managed to find a new way to surprise her.

"My mum was in Gryffindor with you," said a dark-skinned boy, close to the age of taking his first trip on the Express. I had barely glanced at him after scrawling my name on a picture and pushing it across the table.

I look up at the woman next to the young boy. She's lean, attractive with the same darkish skin, a thick black mane of hair plaited down her back, and penetrating blue eyes.

"Parvati, it's good to see you again. It's been ages."

She opened her mouth to say something, but the boy cut her off, "That's Auntie Padma! Mum's back in India."

"Nishita. Don't be rude to Mr. Weasley." Padma scolded the boy.

"But mum says he went to a dance with you and acted like a complete 'tard.'" I wasn't up on the latest juvenile slang, but that didn't sound very flattering.

Despite Padma's complexion, I saw a blush enhanced by her bulging eyes. She snatched up the autographed photo and pretty much yanked the kid away from the table.

Signing two more real fast, I glanced over at the public relations git "handling" all this. "I need to take a quick break. How about ten minutes?"

Outside the store, I spotted the pair. Padma had the poor kid backed up against the wall and was reading him the riot act. "I have never been so embarrassed in my life, Nishita. You just wait until your mother and father hears about this!"

"Go easy on him Padma. He's just telling the truth, I have a history of being ... what was it again? A 'tard?'"

"Mum said you were a whole bunch of other things too!"

"Nishita!"

"Kids, they say the darndest things," I brushed it off. "Does your mum ever say anything about going to that dance with Harry Potter?"

The boy grins really big and opened his mouth, but Padma interrupted, "Not another word, young man. Do you understand?"

The grin turned into a frown and Padma scowled at me, but I saw a hint of mirth at the corners of her lips.

"What?" I asked, holding my hands up defensively. "I figured Harry would get a good laugh out of it. Anyway, I needed to get out of there and stretch my legs for a few minutes. I'm headed over to the ice cream shop. If you want to tag along, I'll treat."

Nishita readily agreed, his aunt was a tad reluctant. The boy peppered me with questions non-stop. I handed him a couple of galleons and sent him off to order for us all.

"You're good with kids," Padma said drumming her finger on the tabletop.

"Similar maturity levels, I guess," I paused and let her laugh at me. "Seriously, big family, all kinds of nieces and nephews, plus three of my own whenever Hermione lets me see them."

"My sister said you and Hermione had a messy breakup. What happened?"

"We rushed into it. She got cold and distant and if you want to know what direction I took, pick up a tabloid. How about you?"

"I've been teaching Arithmancy in France for the last three years, but the position just opened up at Hogwarts and I'm on the shortlist. What do you think about The Reveal?"

Twenty months before that conversation, some blokes in South America got into a magical dust up the likes of which usually involved someone named Harry Potter, but this time it was caught on live television and went onto the Muggle Internet. After attempts to cover it up failed and the Pan American ministry was exposed, the ICW reluctantly repealed the Statutes of Secrecy and the cat was out of the proverbial bag.

Frowning, I said, "It ended up killing my dad."

"I'm so sorry," she said reaching across and grasping my hand. Her touch was gentle, warm, and reassuring.

"S'okay, dad had been like a kid in a candy shop and immediately investigated every aspect of the Muggle world. Unfortunately, he didn't realize that Muggle trains worked differently than the Hogwarts Express and he made contact with what they call The Third Rail. I still miss him. Ironic, the man survived Voldemort's reign of terror twice and he gets done in by his own curiosity."

"I shouldn't have brought it up," she said hastily and with considerable sincerity.

"Don't worry. It was an accident. Other than that, it just means more fans watching the game. I don't mind so much." Quidditch had helped bridge the gap between the two worlds. People all over the planet took to it every bit as much as Dean Thomas' beloved football. It helped that we were in a World Cup cycle. Soon, magical devices sent signals to the muggle satellites and there were several twenty-four hour a day quidditch channels and brooms that could be used by muggles allowed them to play in the "mixed" leagues, but those brooms are slower than the stuff I used to fly at Hogwarts.

"France has had a few issues, but it hasn't been as bad as some of the other countries. Still, I'm looking forward to being back in England. Parvati's in India and has her sights set on making it in Bollywood. If she does, she said I can be her stand in." Padma swirled one finger in the air to signify her lack of enthusiasm at that prospect.

"Mum's going to be more popular than Keira Knightley!" Nishita proclaimed coming back to our table with a tray and the desserts.

"I bet she already is," I said not having the foggiest idea who he was talking about.

We chatted for much longer than we should have, and I knew 'Licia would be furious, but it had been fun talking with someone from the old days who didn't immediately jump onto Hermione's side of things. Eventually, she took her nephew back into the alley to complete his shopping.

I'd been so caught up in the conversation that I'd forgotten to get her floo address.

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"There you go lad," I said handing the picture back to the autograph seeker. "Make sure you yell really loud every time our chasers score, okay?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Weasley!" He runs off while I cringe.

"I feel old all of the sudden."

"At least he didn't mention that you're going to be a grandfather any day now. Your daughter is getting really close."

"You're not really helping, Harry."

"Nonsense Ron, every bloke over forty out there is going to be pulling for you on some level. Most of them just dream of pushing back the sun and here you are doing it."

"You sound like you're channeling Dumbledore," I reply, taking my own semi-cheap shot.

"Now, was that really called for?" He says as we step out of the tunnel. The crowd goes batshit insane when they see Harry. He's all smiles and waves to the crowd before stepping back and gesturing to me, letting me bask in the applause.

"I suppose not," I concede. "Couldn't ask for a better intro. Thanks mate."

"No problem, Ron," he says looking over his shoulder and heading toward the staircase. "And you've got something on your nose."

I wipe my hand across my face and find nothing. Thinking about it for a few seconds, I get the joke. Just more proof that I am getting old.

Slinging one leg over the Thresher, I take to the sky and accelerate for one quick lap around the length of the pitch and offer a few quick waves to the fans, some of them booing me. A gorgeous blonde with reddish highlights in a Falmouth uniform falls in next to me.

"I don't plan on going easy on you, Uncle." Victoire Weasley-Lupin says with a grin. Her nickname is "Sky Angel." She's the leading scorer in the league and the regular season MVP.

"Way I see it, your charms don't faze me, ickle Vic. I might be the toughest ring minder you've faced all year."

She definitely doesn't like being called that or the implication that she scores more because of her heritage. "I'm getting close to thirty, old-timer. There isn't a thing on me that is 'ickle' anymore. Shouldn't you be in the stands with the rest of the geriatric set? Ugh, let me get upwind. How many days does it take to get rid of the smell?"

I wondered if the microphones were picking up our "trash talk." "Vic, that's the smell of victory. Besides, why be up there when I can still show you a thing or two about quidditch?"

Making the final turn, I start to peel off for my rings, as she says, "I'm going to enjoy picking you to pieces, Uncle Ron."

"Not as much as I'm going to enjoy slamming the door on you." If it had been anyone else, I wouldn't have even bothered with the banter, but she's a Weasley by blood. Family honor demands we talk shit to each other at every opportunity.

Limbering up, I zip back and forth between the hoops doing a series of rolls and stretches to shake off a sudden case of the butterflies. I glance overhead at the BBCQ blimp doing the Muggle recording. The thousands in the stand hardly compare to the millions on the other end of those cameras.

As the horn sounds to end the warm up period, we line up in our starting positions as they bring out some songbird to sing God Save the Queen backed by an orchestra. Afterwards, the public address picks up. "Our celebrity starters for today's championship match between the Chudley Cannons and the Falmouth Falcons in none other than Hogwarts' Headmistress Minerva McGonagall!"

The stately old lioness floats on a broom with the box containing the snitch, quaffle, and bludgers behind her to a thunderous applause. I hadn't seen her in ages and the kids said that she's calling it quits after all these years. I tip my head in respect to her.

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"Sixteen long years ago, the great darkness that threatened the land was driven back by the sacrifice of many and the heroics of many more," McGonagall's quavering voice rose from the central dais. "Today we gather in remembrance and to reaffirm that it shall never happen again."

Hermione was staring daggers through me. I didn't envy Harry being stuck in the middle of us. Our kids were out in the audience probably collecting wagers on whether we'd have a row onstage.

"I'm surprised to see you here tonight, Ronald. I'd recommend care in selecting your bedmate this evening; you'll want to make certain she's of age."

I showed up for the first few ceremonies, mostly because the witch (with a b) harassing me had decided that "we must attend." This was the first one I'd attended since the divorce. It was another one of 'Licia's "bright" ideas, but with England's victory in the World Cup, and the fact that Harry and I were both on the team, it was good for my level of exposure and might put additional pressure on The Tornados to sign me to a contract extension.

"After all these years, I think I finally figured it out," I whispered back. "I could never compete with the stick up your arse." The marriage wasn't a complete loss. I had three wonderful sprogs and I'd learned a thing or two about vicious one-liners from a soul sucker that would put a dementor to shame. Sure it was costing me a cubic ton of galleons in child support, but to every cloud there was a little silver lining.

Harry's loud cough and throat clearing sounded suspiciously like he was trying to stifle a laugh, but he put his foot down a second later. "Both of you behave," he said barely moving his lips. "This isn't about you. Put your differences aside for one night or, so help me, I'll paralyze you both and dump you in the Chamber of Secrets."

I didn't know what was going through Hermione's head, but I pretty much figured he'd do it. So, I kept my mouth shut for the rest of the speeches, applauded loudly when Harry gave his speech, gave the ex a token clap or two, and got up and delivered the speech Alicia had written for me word for word under the threat of having to find a new agent. I had to give 'Licia her due; it was a pretty nice speech that encouraged kids to learn from their past and focus on their future.

After the ceremony, there was the hustle and bustle of people milling about and with Hermione never more than ten feet away from my best mate and circling him like an angry harpy, I wandered away, signing a few autographs here and there and trying to make varying degrees of small talk. I was chatting with Neville and Hannah Longbottom when her voice caught me.

"If it isn't my favorite 'tard," Padma said stepping up next to me. She looked good. Damn good. Truth be told, the chance to encounter her was the reason I'd went along with Alicia's idea. I had one of the team's "gophers" verify that Padma got the job and sent an expensive fruit basket and my congratulations.

"Good to see you. How goes the number crunching?" I said smiling. Neville and Hannah begged off a few seconds later and I was left there by the entrance to the Great Hall with Ms. Patil.

"Everything's still divisible despite my best efforts. Congratulations to you on winning the World Cup."

"Well, Wood did most of the work. I only played in a few of the matches."

"I think you should have been the starter. You did win the Guthrie trophy last season."

Hollowly laughing, I replied, "When it comes to National Teams, there's politics involved ... lots of politics."

"Sounds almost as bad as here," she replied and leaned close enough to whisper. "No wonder Snape was such a flaming pool of sphincter pus."

I damn near blew my drink out of my nostrils when she said that. "Mercy, woman! What are you trying to do, choke me?" People say I'm a bit dense and slow on the uptake, but I learned to never underestimate the abilities of an Arithmancer when it comes to timing a joke.

"You were saying something about the politics of the quidditch league," she offered with an innocent expression on her face.

"Yeah, if Ollie had his way, I wouldn't have even been on the squad."

"Really? They say he's starting to lose his edge and even to my less-than-trained eyes, you're at the peak of your game."

"Let's just say we have some personal issues. Fortunately for me, Harry called him out on it and said if they weren't going to put the best team on the pitch, they could find another starting seeker. Wait just a second! Did you just say you've seen me play?"

Padma smiled again and looked back at the crowd in the Great Hall. "It's too crowded in here. Let's take a walk."

I took her arm and we started wandering the halls of that ancient castle. I shared some stories that didn't quite make it into the memoirs and she had a few of her own that ran counter to the notion that all the Ravenclaws did was stuff their heads into books for seven straight years. She even owned up to being one of the people in the stands jeering me with that "Weasley is the King" garbage the Slytherins concocted.

It was a good thing I'd learned to tune that stuff out. On the pro level, the fans were downright vindictive.

"Fascinating stuff, your Arithmancy. I had a coach when I first came into the league who would run her lineup by an Arithmancer to see if any of the numbers were particularly lucky or unlucky that date."

"The interesting part about the subject is that math can be used to explain everything, from the weight distribution on this wall to the trajectory of a quaffle you're trying to stop. Math is the answer to everything, but only if we know what question to ask. What?"

"No wonder you're a good teacher. You know how to explain the basics in one paragraph."

She rolled her eyes and started to look away, but I saw an opening and took it. I stepped in close and kissed her. Padma flinched in surprise, but relaxed quickly. After a few seconds I backed off and took a breath. "Did I get the trajectory right?"

"Close," she said panting a little herself, "but sometimes you'll run into rounding errors and it's best to repeat your calculation a few times to be absolutely certain. Being able to reach the same conclusion every time is vital."

Suddenly, I liked math more than I ever had during my entire life.

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"Lupin intercepts the quaffle and accelerates to the mid line. Crossing pass near side to Avery Ducet. Ducet dodges a bludger and takes a shot from the perimeter – lowside ring one. Save by Weasley. Harrison circles back and Weasley sends the outlet pass to him. Chudley brings the quaffle back up along the far side of the pitch. Both seekers are patrolling high on the lookout for the snitch."

"Oliver, what did you think of Ducet's shot?"

"It's was a ranging shot, Calvin. The Falmouth chaser line wants to see for themselves howfast Weasley can move from the center ring all the way to the edge of ring one and Ducet has one of the strongest releases in the league. That way, they'll knowhowto time his movements and compensate their throws. It's the hallmark of an expert chasing line and when they've gotten the measure on Weasley, it's going to be a long day for Chudley."

"What no compliments about my lateral motion? I thought I got over there pretty fast." I answer "fat bastard's" commentary and keep an eye on the other end. Come on Doug, put the biscuit in the bucket!

"Wolfowitz scores for Chudley! Cannons up ten zip. Anika Rogers looks a little uncomfortable in the rings over on Falmouth. Much was made over her collapse last year against Holyhead. What do you think Oliver?"

"She's been in the league six years and is as steady as they come. Sometimes, letting one get by early will get the adrenaline flowing fast and actually work in her favor. I wouldn't read too much into it."

Yeah, I stop the first shot and Ollie says I'm doomed. Rogers gets burnt on Doug's misdirection and everything's peachy ... she'll bounce back. Have a glass of shut the fuck up on me.

Mashburn from Falmouth has the quaffle now. He's a good chaser, but takes only fifteen percent of the shots, preferring to set up Ducet or Vic for their runs. He's more of a "powerballer," not quite in Ducet's league. Vic's the finesse shot, with superior misdirection skills.

"Mashburn draws the attention from the beaters. Drop pass to Sky Angel. She feints left and throws under Weasley trying to get ring two. Kick save by the Keeper. Quaffle is up for grabs..."

Move! Damn it! Move! I cut under ring three and pull up in front of it, roll right and stretch.

"Lupin gets her own rebound and tries the wraparound ... denied! Weasley gets there in time."

I see the look of disappointment on my niece as I toss the quaffle to Wolfowitz and move back in front of the rings. Not this time, Vic.

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"Your daughter's hell on a broomstick. She'll be a starter soon enough. I'm not saying it just because we're brothers. The crying shame of it is that she'll be gone long before Tutshill's turn to draft comes." I take a glass of water and wipe the sweat from my brow with a rag. I'd been letting Victoire toss quaffles at me for the better part of thirty minutes and more had gotten through than I wanted to admit.

Bill beams and says, "I appreciate you doing this, Ron. You can take a breather and come in and enjoy the party."

Ever since Dad died, Bill had assumed the mantle of Patriarch and done a pretty decent job of it.

"Victoire is just going to throw a quaffle at me. Who knows what I'm in for when I step through that door?"

"Well, at the very least, you should go in there and support your new girlfriend."

"How's Mum handling it?"

"She's upset that Hermione 'suddenly canceled' when she got word that you were bringing Padma here, but I talked to your new flame for a few minutes and she's a respectable lady and not your usual sort. Makes me wonder if you got hit in the head one too many times and finally got some common sense."

I ignored Bill's barb and remove my pads. "Yeah, I figured I'd try something different. I think the ex just wanted to see me bring some bimchette she can make fun of behind her back and to her face, but Padma is pretty accomplished in her field."

"So this is serious?"

"I don't know. We're taking it slow. I went out to Hogsmeade every other Sunday, when I didn't have the kids, and saw her. When it wasn't a Hogsmeade weekend for the students, she'd come out and catch a match. Now that it's summer and she's off, we'll see if she can put up with me on a full time basis. I get the sprogs for two weeks and we're taking them to India where they can see Padma's sister shooting a movie. I might even be able to get them in as extras if Parvati has any pull with the director."

"So I'd heard. Several times from Hermione in fact."

"I didn't bat an eye when she took them down to Australia to visit her parents or to Germany for that ministry function, or when they went to Greece. She was the one that worked so hard to get out of country travel in the divorce decree. Now, she's just being a wench because I want to take my kids somewhere."

Bill laughed, "Normally, I'd mock you at this point, but it sounds like you're doing okay."

We walked inside and I saw Padma sitting next to Alicia, Charlie, and Fleur.

"Whatever they're saying about me, it's probably a lie," I said sitting down next to Padma.

"Fleur was saying you made a complete arse out of yourself three years ago."

"Okay, that wasn't a lie, but in my defense I was drunk. How is Gabrielle by the way?"

My sister-in-law rolled her eyes. So what if my French was nonexistent? Gabby's English wasn't all that great either. I might have misinterpreted her response to "let's go skinny dipping in the pond" and vanished her clothes, but she was the one that started tossing around fireballs and burnt down half the woods behind the Burrow. She wasn't exactly sober either.

Gabby hadn't been to a Weasley family event since and on a side note, it probably explained why Fleur referred to me as her "least favorite" among Bill's brothers.

"How's the Dragon Handling going, Charlie?"

Charlie scratched his head. "It's kind of a mess. Now that the Muggles are in the mix, they seem to want to pass all kinds of laws and restrictions on the preserves. To be honest, I'm thinking of getting out of the business. It seems like the thrill is gone, but maybe after a few weeks of holiday, I'll feel more enthused about it."

"Do what you need to do, bro."

"Actually," Alicia said interrupting. "It means I'm going to be taking on a few more clients and expand my roster, hopefully starting with that chaser outside. The Muggle agencies that handle the footballers are creeping in on our business. One of them tried smooth talking me into joining their firm before resorting to some threats."

"How'd that work out?"

"He found out what it was like to squeal like a pig for a few hours and then I changed him back and showed him the door, effing bastard."

We all got a good laugh out of that. I turned to my date and asked, "How's everyone treating you?"

"Good," she answered. "Your family is as rowdy as you said it would be."

"Well that's us. Our motto is we don't take shit from no one, except for a third cousin. He's in the fertilizer business. He takes shit from everyone."

Padma laughed at my feeble joke as Fleur said, "Padma was just starting to tell us why you two are arithmetically compatible."

"From my readings, Ron is a solid five, but he matches up well to my four. For instance his birthday is March first or three plus one. His jersey is number four. Also,..."

interrupted, "We had our first date in our fourth year."

"I really hadn't planned on mentioning that," Padma said.

Just then, Percy wandered into the room his red hair replaced with chicken feathers. He looked at me and said, "Ron, your children. I highly recommend you do something about their behavior. I believe they're acting out because their mother isn't here."

"Scuse me," I said choking back a laugh. "I've got to go deal with the rugrats." I stood and shouted, "Oi! What are you hellions up to now?"

-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Harrison beats Rogers on the corner and scores. Chudley on top fifty to nothing!"

"You know what that means, Calvin?"

"I sure do Hobbes! It's lollipop time."

I cast an eye skyward where Danica has momentarily abandoned her search for the snitch. She zips up to the center of the pitch and acts like a conductor as all the Chudley fans pull out engorged orange and yellow lollipops and begin singing. Sports celebrations are usually pretty inane things, but this one dated back to when Chudley really stunk up the pitch, back before I was even born. They couldn't score more than four goals in any match for like a thirty game stretch. Some plonker on the wireless sports casts said he'd do something stupid when they finally scored a fifth goal. It took like ten more games, but when they did it, he held up these giant suckers and started singing and dancing to the "Lollipop Guild" song from The Wizard of Oz. Somehow, it stuck.

Other teams have their celebrations, but Chudley's "fifth goal" is among the barmiest.

Sadly, I didn't have time to join in. Vic and her chaser buddies don't care for the sounds of our fans.

"Ducet's racing up the far side, feeds Mashburn near the centerline. Drives to the center. Winds up for the shot ... no back to Ducet. Ducet in the clear. No! Spun like a top by a bludger hitting the back of his broom. Great defensive work by Audrey Benson of Chudley. Errant shot scooped up by Wolfowitz. Ducet's broom is damaged and he's making best speed to the bench for a replacement. If the Cannons hurry they'll have a man advantage for the next minute and a chance to pad their lead."

I point to Benson as she passes and give her the thumbs up. She shouts back, "You've kept the door shut for thirty minutes already. It's high time I got off my arse and gave you some help."

Thirty minutes? Has it been that long already?

"Chudley scores again. Falmouth calls their first timeout to allow Ducet to complete his equipment change and to give Rogers a chance to regain her composure."

The coach flies up to our huddle. The three chasers are in close facing me and the beaters have their backs to us with bats ready, since the bludgers don't really care if the quaffle's in play or not.

"Damn Weasley, what's that smell? Didn't I tell you not to use that homebrewed garbage? Bollocks, it doesn't matter what you smell like if you're keeping a shutout!"

"Coach," I say, "Send a few bludgers downfield at Rogers. She's not having a good game and it'll rattle her cage."

"Don't need to," Liam Atkins says. "She's skittish enough already. Benson, you and Gariss keep harassing the chasers. Turpin, stay on their seeker and jostle her. Chasers, keep mixing it up against Rogers. Get her second guessing herself and keep up the pressure. Be quick back on defense, too. Their line is used to scoring often, but they're prone to turnovers. If we can keep them frustrated, we just might pull this out. Weasley ... fifty-four minutes."

"Huh?"

"That's the longest anyone has ever held this line scoreless. Can you get me to fifty-five?"

"Can do, Skipper."

"Keep an eye out for the bludgers too, Weasley. Kargan over there is probably telling his team to try and rough you up. Watch out for a turkey shoot."

I nod and coach breaks the huddle, flying back to the sidelines. A "turkey shoot" is a long slow, quaffle heave by a chaser while a beater whacks a bludger into the general vicinity of where the Keeper has to be to stop it. It's a timing play that's difficult to execute, but as my reconstructed shoulder knew that all too well, it can change the course of a game.

I drift back to my starting position as the horn sounds and the quaffle goes back into play.

Fifty-four minutes? Five and four, what are the odds?

-x-x-x-x-x-x

"How was the Los Angeles conference?" I asked. I'd sold off my house in London and gotten a rental in Hogsmeade. It wasn't really big enough for the kids, but they were getting older and more often than not, one of the three had "things" to do that didn't involve coming over to see their absentee pop, so I rarely had all of them together. If positions were reversed, I'm sure Hermione would be throwing a fit, but supposedly she'd mellowed a little with that new husband of hers.

Good luck with that, Todd, you unlucky stiff.

"It was great!" Padma said, excitedly. "I got an offer to apprentice under Master Ri in Hong Kong!"

"Hong Kong?" I said and gulped. "That's on the other side of the world."

"I know, but we're used to being separated for weeks at a time, when you're on tour or I'm teaching. Nothing will change. I promise. Did you know that Master Ri only accepts one student at a time? It's one of the most prized apprenticeships in the whole world."

"Aren't you happy at Hogwarts?" There was a feeling in the pit of my stomach that I didn't care for. We'd been dating for three years and I was comfortable.

"I love teaching, but I want to get my mastery. The premier journals won't touch someone that doesn't have one. My papers would still get published, but I'll be cited more in other peoples work. Master Ri said himself that my work is good, but I won't be considered in the upper echelon without a Mastery. Please Ron. You've been a star all of your adult life. I know Arithmancy will never have the following that Quidditch does, but this is my chance to be in the 'big leagues.' I just want my chance to shine. Please?"

"I don't know. That's a pretty big distance," I said not really buying into the idea.

"You could come too. You've got one year left on your contract here. They have quidditch leagues in Asia. Why can't you sign with someone over there?"

I scrunched my nose at the suggestion and said, "The Asian leagues stink. Why would I want to play there? And I think you're forgetting how hard it's going to be to get back here and see my kids."

"Ron, meet me in the middle on this. This is the first time I've asked you to make a sacrifice for me."

It wasn't a "Hermione sized" row, but it was the biggest one we'd had. Eventually, we calmed down and said that we'd make it work somehow. We talked it over, she swore it would work out, and I cared enough about her to let her chase her dream. No voices were raised, no tantrums were thrown. In fact, we went out and had an expensive dinner to celebrate.

If I had to recap the greatest mistakes Ron Weasley ever made, running off all jealous of Harry and Hermione when we were looking for the Horcruxes would still be number one.

Not trying harder to stop Padma from going to Hong Kong was a close second.

-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Sixty-Three minutes into the match and the Falcons can't unravel the mystery that is Ron Weasley. He's been everywhere he's needed to be today, Hobbes and already stopped thirty shots on goal."

"Right you are, Calvin. He's like a bear out there with a pack of wild dogs circling him. Weasley's playing the game of his career out there. His opponent isn't just the Falcon chaser line, but Father Time as well."

"But you can't forget about the superb defense being played by the Cannon beaters either, they've certainly helped their keeper out in the last fifteen minutes on several occasions. Still, it's impressive what Weasley's doing out there. He's got the whole team pulling for him."

Maybe my ears are messed up. Woods just gave an inch. That alone is miraculous.

"Oliver's right. It seems like all the Cannons have elevated their play, perhaps inspired by Weasley's example. They're up one thirty to nil and if this trend continues, even a snitch catch by Kate Ardell isn't going to save Falmouth. She's been close twice, but Chudley's Turpin ran her off on both occasions."

"Definitely a lot of physical play between the opposing seekers today. The referees are letting it go for now."

"Do they let those guys drink up in the booth while they're calling a game? Seriously, I'm a bear back here?" I holler to Benson. She shrugs and goes back to the business at hand.

"Mashburn works the near side. He slings it to Lupin she lobs the quaffle from long range in toward ring three."

Where're the bloody bludgers? I move to intercept and look instead for the Falcon beaters. I catch the quaffle but hear the whooshing sound I knew was coming. My gut says it's coming from the right, so I roll away.

It gets me under my right arm on the side of my ribs. The pads absorb some of the blow, but I know rib damage when I feel it. The crowd groans as one. Drifting away slowly I gnash my teeth together and look to where I let the quaffle drop.

"Weasley just got hammered! Harrison beats Ducet and Lupin to the quaffle and the Cannons call time. Oh, looking at the replay you can see

he knew it was coming too."

"Benson, Gariss weren't you paying attention when I said they'd be after him? Don't answer, don't even open your stupid traps! Harrison help me get his pad up. I want to see what it looks like for myself."

Coach lifts my right arm and it feels more like spaghetti than a muscled limb. Harrison whistles and it isn't a "wow, there's absolutely nothing wrong with you" whistle either. Spitting some blood out of my mouth, I look down the pitch and catch Vic's eyes. She looks horrified and glances away. I tell myself she's just playing the game, but it'd be a good idea to avoid me at the next family gathering. There's only one person in our large family I can't take in a duel and I get a pass on that because he's Harry Potter.

"Here it comes boyo," Coach warns and puts his palm on my side.

I do my best not to yell, a muffled gurgling sound comes out anyway. "I'm three years older than you. Who're you calling boyo?"

"Got me there," he concedes still groping my side with what feels like a pitchfork. "Old man it is then."

"Alright then, what's the damage?" I grumble.

"Bruises and fractures up and down the line, but no clean breaks as far as I can tell. You want me to move Gariss over to keeper and switch you to beater?"

"You really want to turn my championship shutout over to Pete? Better check my ears for damage as well. I don't think I heard you right, Skipper. Besides, I'm a righty and I wouldn't be able to hit a bloody thing with a beater bat. I've been hurt worse than this before. It's just a flesh wound."

He misses or ignores my feeble attempt at humor. "Alright, but you're on a short leash, Ron. Get his pad back on and make it snug. It'll only throb that way. Listen up, they smell blood now and it's only going to get harder from here on out. You've all played one for the ages so far, but we didn't come all this way just to let it go at the end. Don't give an inch! Turpin, any time you feel like it in the next ten minutes would be a swell time to catch the bloody snitch."

We break huddle and I drift back to my normal position while raising and lowering my right arm slowly, testing it. The results don't please me. I compensate and float closer to ring three. They'll try to make me defend with my right side now.

I have been hurt worse before. I can block it out and continue. This is nothing compared to the pain I've been through. I can scrap with the best of 'em!

-x-x-x-x-x-x

"I'm here to see Padma," I said to Xiao Fei Yang. There were people in this world I didn't like. Draco Malfoy was one. Xiao Fei Yang was another. He was a short, angry Asian bigot, and Master Ri's manservant and the gatekeeper into the Arithmancer's sanctum.

There was a long pause. Its part of what I hated about this part of the world. People always wait before answering. It made me feel like they're trying to make me feel stupid on purpose.

"She working today. You see some other time," he replied in broken English.

Considering I'd scheduled this getaway to Fiji two months in advance, I'd found it pretty difficult to believe she'd back out on me.

I gritted my teeth and tried once more. "I am here to see Padma. We have a vacation planned. We are supposed to be leaving in two hours."

The man grimaced at me and said, "Vacation was cancelled. Master Ri have big deadline. Come back later, Da Bi Zi." He called me "Big Nose" which was an insult to westerners.

I'd tried to abide by Padma's wishes. I'd brought gifts for Master Ri when I'd visited, but apparently bringing four of anything was frowned on. How the hell was I supposed to know that was offensive? It's Padma's "number!"

"I'll leave when Padma tells me she can't go. What you need to do is go call her, right now."

"You want me to call? Fine I go call!" He spun and slammed the door in my face. Padma spoke fondly of this little sphincter. I had a theory that Xiao Fei Yang was pining for my lady. I spent the next few minutes pondering how the Asian man must feel inadequate compared to an internationally recognized quidditch player.

My musings were interrupted by a pair of apparition cracks behind me. I turned, dropping the flowers in my hand to snatch my wand out of its holster. The first one sent a stunner variant popular on this side of the world. I dodged to the right and threw up a quick pulse shield that Harry taught me. Sure it wouldn't hold up as well as most typical shields, but if you're not prepared, it's bloody hard to not get distracted by a big flashing light. He called it his "Blue Light Special," and said he picked it up from a Yank.

I immediately tossed a couple of conjured ropes from the end of my wand and dive rolled onto the grass. That's when the first cutter whizzed near enough to where I'd been standing.

Cutter's weren't playthings. They were trying to hurt me and I'd come a long way from being a frightened schoolboy who could still hold his own against Riddle's Death Eaters.

There was some kind of intricate shrubbery that the little sniveling wretch inside the house was always pruning. I transfigured a big chunk of it into a

claw and grabbed one of the attackers from behind with it. Dodging another spell, I ripped the claw out of the ground and turned it into one big old ball of greenery rolling right at the second bloke complete with the screams of the first guy trapped inside. The one guy turned and tried to vanish his buddy out of it, but I used Snape's old *Levicorpus* and yanked his sorry arse into the air and the plonkers collided in a satisfying crunch. I followed that display with a chain of stunners and immobilizers to make certain that neither one of them would be getting up soon and turned my attention back toward the estate. A wave of my wand told me their wards were up.

"If you've hurt Padma in any way, I will make what I just did to those two seem like nothing! Bloody cheap wards, my brother could take them down in a minute. I'm nowhere near as good as he is, so that means you've got about three."

With no response forthcoming, I started unraveling the first layer of wards, "Little pig, little pig, let me in!"

Eventually, I did see Padma and she was livid.

I was too, but then again, I was wandless and in an apparition warded cell.

"What the bloody hell were you doing?" She accused.

"I was trying to see you. That little sewer urchin called in some thugs who attacked me."

"You blew up a portion of Master Ri's home! You put Xiao Fei Yang into the hospital! You humiliated Master Ri when he came out of the study."

"Fei had it coming. Ri came out with his wand drawn and you were nowhere to be found." When the Aurors showed up, it was six against one and the odds didn't really favor me.

"I was at the Grand Library doing research ... research that's all but useless now since you just destroyed an entire year of our work. We'll never make the Sydney conference now!"

"Hey, I wasn't the one who started tossing around lethal spells! Why the fuck aren't you concerned about that?" Okay, I was pretty ticked off at that point as well.

"You're not even supposed to be here!"

"What are you talking about, Padma? Last I checked we were going to Fiji."

"I told you I had to cancel."

"You most certainly did not!" I'd taken a hit to a head every now and then, an occupational hazard in my line, but I was fairly certain I'd recall that.

"I did so!"

"Did you floo me? Did you send a letter? Did I respond? Bollocks, none of this is important right now. Just get up with the best lawyer you can find and I'll get out of this. We can leave Hong Kong as soon as this mess gets sorted out."

"You don't understand what we're doing here. This is huge! We're taking data from the LHC supercollider and processing it. We're unraveling the meaning of life, of magic, of the universe, down to its basic building blocks!"

"Everyone knows it's forty-two. That Adams bloke solved it a long time ago."

In hindsight, I would recommend never trying to make a joke about your girlfriend's passion from the wrong side of a jail cell and after you'd destroyed what she had spent a good portion of last year working on.

"I always knew you never took what I did seriously Ron! Life's just one big party to you isn't it?"

"Put a sock in it, Padma," I said gripping the bars and pressing my face up to it. "You want the meaning of life? I'll tell you what it is. Life is our toes in the sand on a beach. Life is waking up and being excited in the morning. Math isn't the answer to everything and life is not running yourself into the ground crunching numbers for eighteen hours a day while the rest of the world is passing you by. Life is traveling, going new places, having fun, being with family and friends. When was the last time you went anywhere other than Hong Kong that didn't involve me scheduling around your conferences and work retreats. I practically had to drag you to see Vati last time I was here and even she could see what a bucket full of sunshine you've turned into."

"I never want to see you again, Ron. Get the hell out of my life. You can rot in here for all I care." She stormed out of that room and out of my life.

Ten hours later, I got my lawyer – courtesy of Harry. Eight hours after that, my lawyer and I were in front of a trio of magistrates. The two men and one woman emerged from the pensieve and conferred. The translator filled me in on their decision.

"We have reviewed the events as have been provided by the parties and see that there has been a grievous misunderstanding on all parts. Mister Weasley, you did not comply with the request to vacate the premises, which in turn caused Mister Xiao Fei Yang to contact bodyguards in the employ of his Master. The bodyguards reacted poorly to the unusual shield spell you erected and attempted bodily harm. At this point you disabled your opponents and attacked the estate. Normally, this would be considered criminal assault, but given your voiced concern over the safety of Master Ri's apprentice this is mitigated to simple trespass and vandalism. In agreement with your lawyer, you will pay three thousand galleons in reparation to Master Ri and receive a suspended sentence of six months imprisonment that is contingent on you leaving Hong Kong immediately and not returning in the next five years. Should you do so; the court will impose the prison term. Do you accept these terms?"

I started to give my answer, but felt a firm hand on my shoulder. *Howlong had Harry been standing there!*

He nodded to me.

The four most difficult words I've ever said were, "I accept those terms." Honestly, Ri and his representatives didn't look all that pleased either.

Harry walked me out and thanked the lawyer in Chinese. My brother waited with me while they returned my wand and other possessions.

"What the hell was that all about, Harry?" I asked in a hushed voice.

"Ri's got a lot of fame in this part of the world. You humiliated him and honor is big here. He was trying to get you put away for five years. The judges were going to go along with it too, but I showed up and explained what forces would set in motion if my brother and best friend in the world was tossed behind bars."

Harry gestured to his side and I said, "That's not holly and phoenix feather."

"No, it isn't. There's an old saying that goes speak softly and carry a big stick."

"You can say that again. Thought you stashed that in the old man's tomb." Harry didn't pussyfoot around. He came to play and I was certain he'd lay waste to half this city if needed.

Harry relaxed and smiled. "Do you know how many times some fool has broken in there and tried to steal it? We keep a fake in there that's a portkey right to the aurors."

"Thanks mate. I've made a right mess of things here." I could have been upset that he used his fame and position to get me out of a jam, but the prospect of five years in some Asian hellhole can force a man to swallow a whole lot of pride.

He nodded and replied, "You never forget your first international incident. Even after all these years, The Vatican still doesn't like it when I show my face in Italy."

Of course something didn't quite fit. "Harry, for a 'Goodwill Ambassador to the Muggles,' you seem to have some serious pull."

"You really want to know?"

"Wouldn't have asked if I didn't."

My brother gave a half-smile, pulled out the elder wand and did the meanest looking privacy ward I'd ever seen. I wasn't even sure I could hear my own thoughts straight!

Then he said, "Yeah, I stand on a stage with world leaders and I do ribbon cutting ceremonies at those charmed turbine plants that will phase out the nuclear and fossil fuel plants eventually. I shake hands with wizards and witches who spend all day vanishing toxic waste and transfiguring garbage into reusable materials, but you know what else a Goodwill Ambassador does?"

"No."

"Every so often, I have to get together with a strike team from the ICW. We go bust down the doors of some 'tin pot' Voldemort wannabe and deliver a message to that wizard or witch. If they're lucky, it's just a courtesy call to let them know that the ICW is watching. A lot of them aren't that lucky and let's just leave it at that, okay?"

"Does Ginny know?" I was flabbergasted. I never even suspected.

"Who do you think made me go get the Deathstick in the first place? Anyway, enough about what I do, let's talk about you. What are you going to do about Padma?"

"It doesn't sound like I can take a trip over to Ri's sanctum and have a sit down with her anytime soon. She told me to get out of her life and left me sitting in a jail cell. I might be slow on the uptake, but that's a bit stronger than her telling me that we need some time apart."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry Ron."

"Yeah me too."

"What now?"

"Want to go to Fiji with me?"

"Wish I could, but I've got Goodwill Ambassador stuff to do."

"The nice kind or the not so nice kind?" I asked.

"It depends. Hopefully the former, but probably the latter."

"Need some backup?"

"Ron, you're as good as any in a scrap and maybe when you finally hang up those keeper pads, I'll train you up right, but only if you're serious about

it. Without the training, you'd be a liability to the team. No offense."

"None taken," I said. My inner child had just been spanked by Padma. It didn't need a second helping from my best friend.

My personal effects finally showed up and Harry went with me along with the auror escort to the international departure center. He waited to make sure the aurors left before telling me to have a good time on my vacation and put the events of the last twenty-four hours behind me.

With my shrunken luggage in a fanny pack I lined up to catch the portkey to Fiji. There was a shapely brunette witch standing there in a bikini with a sun hat on. She looked like she was heading straight to the beach. The other two travelers were a pair of corporate types in suits.

"Hey, aren't you Ron Weasley?" she asked tilting her sunglasses. Her accent was Australian. She was in her early twenties and introduced herself. Her name was Julie, Julia, or Judy. It didn't really matter.

"That's me," I answered shaking her hand. She said she used to play keeper on her school team a few years ago and that she loved watching the matches on the BBC Australia feed.

After landing in Fiji, she said we should have dinner or something. I politely declined, but after the third day of no communication from Padma, I caught up with Julie/Julia/Judy and we had dinner or something.

Numbers were that important to Padma. The problem in front of me wasn't too complex. Simply put, it was "How many women will it take to forget about her?"

The answer was fairly large.

-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Harrison scores! Chudley runs the score up to one sixty to nothing. On every front of the game today the Cannons have outplayed the Falcons. Simply put, they want it more and are laying it all on the line. The Chudley faithful are on their feet screaming. I don't think anyone has sat down in the last fifteen minutes."

"Ever since Weasley's injury, you've seen extra hustle out of the rest of his teammates. The beaters are playing back a little, but the unheralded chasing line of Harrison, Wolfowitz, and Smythe is really taking it to Falmouth."

"At this point, they're going to have to score and then catch the snitch just to tie things up. Things are getting pretty desperate on Coach Kargan's sideline."

"Mashburn sets up Ducet. Ducet to Lupin. Harrison moves up to jam Lupin. Smythe and Wolfowitz are in double up on Ducet. They're leaving Mashburn in the clear on the far side. Lupin tosses to Mashburn who slashes in and takes the shot. Save by Weasley at the inside of ring three."

"That's good defense by Chudley. Mashburn doesn't have Lupin's finesse or Ducet's power. You can see where they're trying to force Weasley into making saves with the right side of his body, but so far he's done an excellent job of protecting his injury. Of the last five shots only one was stopped by his right arm. Oliver, you've been in this spot before, what's Chudley doing here?"

"Weasley's a few degrees off his comfort zone and compensating for his injury. Kargan's obviously going to adjust, he's been trying to get Ducet on Weasley's right hand side, but the two chaser press isn't letting that happen. He'll either move Lupin to the right side and see if she can beat the press or get Mashburn over on that side. That's when we find out if Coach Atkins is more concerned with protecting Weasley's right side from any shots or whether they're worried about the strength of Ducet's release."

No, they can't be bothered to talk about how Rogers on the other side has collapsed and let sixteen out of the fifty or so shots get by her. They are more interested in helping coach the Falcon chasers right now.

"Lupin darts in and intercepts the quaffle. She's on a breakaway and the Falmouth beaters are both controlling the bludgers. It's a one on one with Weasley."

I tune the effing bastards out. Vic is hauling wood straight down the center of the pitch. *What's she going to do?* She's got the quaffle underhanded. Sixty percent of her underhanded shots go to the keeper's right. *Watch for the tip of her elbow! If she doesn't show it, the shot's to my left. No! Arms coming up. She's cocking. Go right!"*

"Lupin heaves to Weasley's right. It gets by him and ... off the side of the rings. She had the right idea, but he cut her angle down to the point where it was an extremely low percentage shot. Weasley hurries to get the rebound and clear the quaffle."

"Too close," I say aloud, panting. I flip the quaffle to Benny Smythe and watch him circle behind our rings and head back up the pitch on the far side.

"Action on the other side of the pitch, Ardell and Turpin are onto something. It looks like the snitch. They're jostling each other hard and cut across the field. A lot of hand checking going on. Ardell's got the inside position. The snitch turns back into the mess and oh there's a foul by Turpin ... but wait Ardell has the snitch!"

I look to the big screen for the replay in disbelief. Danica's hand check ended up going into Ardell's face and gouging a little eye. The snitch turned back into them and bounced off Turpin's gloved hand, but that slowed it enough for Ardell to snatch it out of the air.

The Skipper is already heading to the ref screaming, "Incidental contact! Incidental contact! You can't call that!" Falmouth's coach is on his way too. I start to go over with all the other players, but the sharp pain in my side says to limit my movements. Besides, I've lived and breathed quidditch all my life. I already know how it's going to go down.

Unhitching my chest protector, I slip out of it and let it fall to the ground. *It'll just be in the way. On second thought, I should have kept it on. It'd been covering up a decent sized blood stain. Here I thought I was just sweating more than usual.*

Falmouth will get a penalty shot. If I stop it, we win. If I don't it goes to a shoot out. Regular season games can end in a tie. Playoffs and championships can't.

Skipper calls time when the ref finally runs him off. The rest of the team is on the way as other officials come out to trap the bludgers.

"Weasley, you look like a fucking inferius! Let me look at that!" He peels up my shirt. I look down and see a piece of bone protruding about a quarter inch out of the skin.

"Must've been one of the last few shots." His hand moves over my rib cage and I yelp.

"That looks like the only one. You've done enough, Ron. Gariss, take over."

"Not happening, coach," I say. "I ain't flying away from this one. I got this shit."

Coach mulls it over. "You really think so?"

"This is my day! No one's going to take it from me. I own those chasers!" I yell loud enough to make sure the other side hears me.

"Alright, I'm sold, but if they get it by you, I'm bringing in Gariss for the shoot out."

"Fair enough, Skipper."

"Harrison, get the man's chest protector."

"Nah, let 'em see it. The bludgers are boxed and the bloody shirt will mess with the shooter's head."

"Hardcore, Weasley. Hardcore," Smythe says.

"Ron, you stop this and I'll name my first born after you," Danica adds.

"What if it's a girl?" Harrison asks.

"Then it's Rhonda or Veronica, I don't know," she replies hastily.

"This is all well and good you bunch of broom riding apes, but how about we save this for the locker room, before my keeper bleeds out?"

Skipper clears them away and I turn my attention to Kargan and his three chasers who are huddled near the middle of the pitch. Vic looks angry, disgusted kind of angry. She throws her arms up in the air in protest. I can see a bit of her Veela nature showing. They break their conference and it is Avery Ducet heading to the referee for the penalty shot.

"Kargan elects to go to the power quaffle over the skill shot."

"Lupin is not happy either. She is the league MVP."

"I think, in defense of Kargan, he has to do this. Lupin is Weasley's niece and as a family, they're as close as it comes. He's out there looking beaten and bleeding through his uniform. I'd never accuse her of conflicting loyalties, but by Kargan going to Ducet, he removes the chance that we'd ever have to ask the question. It's the right move."

"Alright, Avery Ducet," I say. "You're my bitch. Come get some."

"This is it! Ducet takes the quaffle and starts his run picking up speed and bolting down the centerline. He dips to his left, shifts right. Brings the quaffle up for release and ..."

His wrist is the key! He's masking it by bringing the quaffle up high and using his head to block my line of sight.

Make a decision...

Which way does he go?

Percentages...

Percentages...

Ring one gets forty-five percent of his shots, ring two eighteen. Thirty seven percent go to ring three.

I'm hurt. He'll go to ring three.

Forty-five?

Ring one!

"There's the shot, highside ring one! Weasley's stretching for the stop..."

The quaffle grows larger in my field of vision. It's my life, my mortality coming at me. It's everyone who said I'm just Harry's sidekick, a so-so keeper clinging to the faded coattails of a "just above average" career. 'Licia's mangling of my finances and telling me how much she'd lost. It's all the bitter words from Hermione that I'd earned from cheating on her, every one night stand where I told the girl I'd be in touch and then never bothered because something I hadn't tried caught my eye.

It's Padma turning away from me all over again.

"...he smacks the quaffle away! Cannons win! Cannons win! The door was open for a split second, but Weasley got there in time and slammed it shut! Fifty one shots on goal by Falmouth and Fifty one saves by Weasley! Can you believe it?"

The roar of the crowd is deafening. My teammates fly up and surround me. Benson and Turpin kiss me. ... So does Wolfowitz! Coach pushes them back so he can close my wound with his wand and Harrison lifts a blood replenisher to my lips like its champagne or something.

It tastes like victory.

-x-x-x-x-x-x

Skipper's handiwork was okay, but the team healer insisted on pulling me into her office and doing it to her satisfaction. Rib injuries are never easy.

"They should have brought you to me straight away."

"Sorry Doc, most of that's on me. I wanted to stay on the field for the MVP trophy presentation and take a couple turns around the pitch with it and the Championship cup!"

"Under the circumstances, I guess I can let it slide, Weasley," she says. "You're going to need to lay off it for some time. You won't want to do any drills for three to five weeks."

"I think I'm done," I reply

"Doc" raises an eyebrow, "Really?"

"Yeah, how can I follow that up?"

"Good point, Ron. You told anyone yet?"

I shake my head and say, "Nah, my agent is probably reminding the general manager about the escalator bonus in my contract for getting the MVP award and the rest of my family is probably won't stop partying for the next month. I'll tell them when the time is right.

It occurs to me that I've done something incredible, but outside of my kids and the rest of the clan, I don't have someone to celebrate it with.

The healer finishes, congratulates me again and leaves me in the trainer's room ... alone.

I'm all alone and I've played the last game of quidditch I'll ever play. What now?

A knock at the startles me out of my mental death spiral. "Mr. Weasley?"

"Come back later!"

"Many pardons," the voice says from the other side of the door. "I'm an employee from the English Quidditch Hall of Fame and if it is not too much trouble I've been asked by my superiors to acquire Mr. Weasley's jersey for posterity. I just wanted to make certain you hadn't vanished it. I will wait outside until you're ready."

Either he's legit, or that's one brazen souvenir hunter. I wonder if he is going to sell it on Ebay.

"Come on in."

The door opens and a young man with dark skin enters. He smiles at me. "My mum was in Gryffindor with you."

"Nishita! Haven't seen you in a few years, lad. How've you been? Working for the Hall of Fame?"

"Yes, they want to display it. According to records, yours is the first shutout by a keeper in a championship game in over three hundred years. May we have it?"

"It'd just end up balled up in one of my drawers somewhere. Go ahead."

"The Hall of Fame thanks you for your contribution, sir," he says and then pauses. A frown crosses his face and he continues. "May I speak to you

on a more personal matter?"

"What is it, Nishita?"

"It is not my place, but I would ask you to come and speak to my aunt."

"She's the one who told me that she never wanted to see me again. I'm respecting her wishes."

Nishita explains, "My aunt is here interviewing to be Headmistress McGonagall's replacement. She's been offered the job, but is leaning toward turning it down. I think you are the reason why."

"Me? It's been over five years. I doubt she's still carrying a torch for me."

He shakes his head and says, "Last week, my mother caught her listening to your game on a wireless in the guest room and crying. She refused to discuss the matter further with mother. The very next day, she began to speak of not taking the Headmistress position. I may be young and foolish, but I do not believe in coincidences. Please Mister Weasley, I am not asking you to go and apologize to her, but simply make peace with her. You appear to have moved on, but I sense my aunt has not."

I should be on my way up to the family box, to get their congratulations, and do an interview with the network that'll allow me to take a couple of cheap shots at Wood. Instead, I look up at the clock – one minute until five ... four fifty-nine ... four plus five make nine.

I stopped believing in coincidences a long time ago too.

"Alright, let me grab a change of clothes," I say.

He takes a whiff, "May I suggest a shower first? What is that smell?"

"It's my own brand of salve and it works! But you're right; that's probably a good idea."

-x-x-x-x-x-x

"Hello Parvati," I say.

"How do you know I'm not Padma?"

"Your eyes. Hers always had a bit more grey in them. You're also not that surprised I'm here."

"Nishita is a wonderful young man, but I'm the mastermind behind this."

"There's something you don't hear every day."

"Cute, 'Won Won,' very cute. Congratulations on the game. How're you ribs? Did you apparate into a dumpster on the way here?" She sniffs the air in disdain.

"Har Har. I'll live. Numbing charms work wonders. Saw your last movie, it didn't suck as much as the one before it."

"You're so kind, but let's get to the problem of my sister. Ten days ago, she wanted to be Headmistress of Hogwarts more than anything in the world. Tomorrow, she's rejecting the offer and leaving the country. Whatever is vexing my sister has to do with you. Please go and fix it."

"I'll be hanged if I know what it is. Where is she?" That didn't sound good. I hope it isn't what I suspect.

"Out back, in the garden, good luck, Ron."

The walk is longer than I remember. All the way over here I was trying to think of what to say.

She looks up when the screen door opens. There's a moment of shared disbelief as our eyes meet and it all makes sense. So many emotions play out on her face. Surprise, panic and the one I key on – fear.

"Ri made you swear an oath didn't he?"

"Yes, the unbreakable vow ... to never seek you out again. It was ... it was the only way he would keep me on as his apprentice. I was so furious that I agreed."

"He went too far!"

She drops her head into her hands and sobs. "When I was granted my mastery, I asked him to release the vow and he refused. He said that I was better off without you in my life."

I respond to her pain and embrace her. For the first time in years, she's in my arms again. The dull ache in my side pales next to the one in my heart. I feel something I haven't felt in years. Our lips touch and I taste the salt of her tears. "I'm sorry I never tried to get in contact with you."

Sniffling, she stares into my eyes and says, "That little shit Xiao Fei Yang was blocking our correspondence! He never sent that letter when I cancelled the vacation to Fiji. After you and I broke up, he started trying to use love potions on me until Master Ri dismissed him."

I could easily kill both of them, but they aren't important. Padma is. "It doesn't matter," I say. "I sought you out. We can be together again."

"I'm not sure. The wording of the vow was that I could never seek you out. Literally, if we agreed to meet somewhere for lunch, I could be seeking you out."

Searching my mind for everything I know about these kind of vows, I say, "Well, maybe the vow won't be effective if your name was Padma Weasley."

"Ron!"

"Yeah, I guess we can't be sure. C'mon, I'll take you back to the stadium."

"What? Why?"

"One of the last things you said to me was something along the lines of life is my view of life is one big party. Oddly enough, the answer to our problem is at one big party right now. Considering I just won the big game and now I have a chance to get you back, I can't think of a better place to be."

She shakes her head. "I know you think the world of Bill, but I've spoken to other Cursebreakers. He won't be able to help us."

I smile and kiss her again. "Wrong brother. I'll never pretend to know the answer to life's great questions, but I do know what the answer is to misbehaving wizards. It's Harry Potter."

-x-x-x-x-x-x

Three days later, there's a knock at my flat's door. I get up and try not to wake Padma.

It's Master Ri and Harry.

"Hello."

"Morning Ron," Harry says. "I'm trying to help this Master Arithmancer locate his former apprentice. He can't stop talking about her. In fact, it appears he's been cursed. No matter what he tries to say, everything comes out as ... well, I guess I should let him show you. Go ahead Master Ri."

The man looks furious, after a minute he opens his mouth and says, "Padma Patil, I release you from any and all vows you have made to me and apologize for my childish behavior."

"That's a pretty nasty curse, mate. I'll go wake her."

"Better hurry. If we don't get it lifted soon, it might just spread to his hands and then everything he tries to write will end up being the same message."

The look on Ri's face is priceless.