

Author's Notes. If Harry Potter were mine, I'd be a great deal richer. Thanks be to JK.

Chapter One: A Cry in the Dark

Ron Weasley limped slowly down the corridor. Every step sent pain shooting up his leg, courtesy of a ricocheting curse. The medi-witches had barely managed to preserve his leg, so he was thankful for any mobility, however painful. He came to a halt, gathering his energy. It was going to be a long and draining night and he might not be able to run anymore, but they'd needed as many wand-wielders as possible to make Hermione's plan work. Even Remus and Charlie were here, the largest gathering of the Order since the failed Azkaban raid three years ago. But despite the increased wizard power... well, Ron hadn't felt particularly optimistic in some time now.

Two former Aurors stood on guard outside the classroom. They snapped to attention, albeit sloppily, as Ron approached. He gave them a brief nod of recognition. He entered the classroom slowly and glanced around. The room had been cleared, though chairs lined the walls. He could see Charlie slumped over sleeping. Tonks and Remus didn't look much better, their eyes ringed with exhaustion. Her once-bright hair was dark,

and his showed more than a hint of grey. The war had not been kind to the Lupins. Ron sank gingerly into a chair and a groan caught in his throat. He hated being this weak. He should be standing shoulder to shoulder with Harry and Hermione, not hobbling about. No the war hadn't been kind to anyone.

Only Luna seemed to have miraculously stayed the same. She was gazing dreamily off into space with her wand tucked firmly behind her ear.

"Hello, Ronald," she said, tilting her head slightly to peer at him with the same wide eyes as ever, but he'd known her for years and could read how weary she was. Perhaps he would have been fooled had he not heard her crying at night. He smiled tightly at her but it didn't reach his eyes. It never reached his eyes. Luna nodded in understanding and returned to staring at nothing in particular.

Hermione and Flitwick were hard at work in the center of the room where they had painstakingly drawn a pentagram on the ground. Ron thought he recognized runes for distance, journey, safety, and victory among a multitude of others he didn't know. He watched as they created two overlapping Diamonds of Protection, a wise precaution.

Even Voldemort would have to pause in the face of two Diamonds. Not for long, but anything that could make Voldemort pause stopped almost everything else in its tracks. The door swung open again and Slughorn and Shacklebolt entered. That just left Harry and Ginny to be accounted for.

Ron glanced around the room. Only twenty left of the core of the Order – there used to be so many more. The door swung open a final time to admit Ginny and Harry. They were dirty and tired with burn marks on their face and clothes, but at least they'd arrived safely. Ginny sank into the closest chair, but Harry turned to face the pentagram. He frowned slightly.

“Hermione?”

“Almost done,” she replied, without bothering to turn. With a swish and flick, she finished her protection spell. She glanced down and nodded at the elderly Flitwick, who looked as if he wanted to give her 10 points for excellent charms work. Of course she wasn't a student anymore and he wasn't a teacher, but it was the thought that counted.

“We’re ready,” Flitwick said. A murmur went through the Order, hope and desperation showing in their faces. They’d been losing ground steadily since the Ministry had gone into exile. Hermione’s plan was the Order’s last gasp and everyone knew it, whether they believed it would work or not.

“Positions, please.”

Flitwick smiled wanly. As Ron rose, a jolt of pain shot down his leg. The others formed a loose circle around the pentagram, just outside the confines of the Diamonds of Protection. Ron took his place at Harry’s side and glanced at Hermione, who nodded, her features softening slightly. Harry gave him a boyish grin that he must have practiced in front of the mirror. Ron smiled back and it almost reached his eyes. The trio stood side by side once again and, just for a moment, everything was as it should be.

“Does everyone know what to do?” Hermione asked, glancing around the circle. They nodded grimly. She let out a deep breath. “Okay, let’s do this.” She drew a dagger and contemplated it for a moment. Swiftly, she sliced open her palms, two shallow cuts. The dagger went around the circle as one by one the Order members followed her example.

No one so much as whimpered, and there was barely a flinch among them. This was Voldemort's England; pain was a way of life.

Finally, the knife came to Ron. He swallowed his disgust. The Weasleys had been staunch defenders of the Light for generations. Distrust of old magic, of blood magic, practically flowed through his veins. Hermione's spell was borderline Dark and part of him was screaming at himself to stop. Was this what Percy had died for? So his brothers could perform a Dark ritual at the dead of night?

Ron sighed. There was no other way. Every person in this room would gladly give up a piece of his or her soul for the greater good, and so would he. He glanced down at the knife cold against his flesh. Just two quick slashes and it was done. He welcomed the sharp, stinging pain. Black magic should hurt, but more importantly it drowned out the ache in his leg. He reached out and took Hermione's bleeding hand in his. Around him the Order formed a circle of blood, hand by hand. Merlin, he hoped this worked.

Hermione gave his hand a quick squeeze and their eyes met. He could tell that she was desperate, cold, and tired, but she was Hermione and she was beautiful, so very

beautiful. Ron squeezed her hand back and smiled grimly as they began to chant. He didn't know the language, didn't know what the guttural sounds meant, but they'd all spent months learning the spell phonetically, long tedious months of saying the words over and over again until he'd started hearing them in his sleep. Again and again they chanted the spell while their blood mixed, but nothing seemed to be happening.

Slowly, the runes began to glow with a strange golden light. The chant went on and on. The pentagram was glowing brighter and brighter now and began to spin. The carefully drawn lines began to shift and blur, merging with the runes to become a single whirlpool of light that swirled inward faster and faster, until a small radiant sphere no more than a centimeter in diameter formed in the air at the exact center of the circle. It hovered for a moment, then without warning exploded outwards. The energy burned through the first Diamond of Protection in seconds and struck the second with a loud bang. The whole room shuddered, sending the Order sprawling to the ground, but their protection held and the glow subsided.

Ron couldn't help the moan of pain that escaped him as he landed squarely on his back. Looking around, he could see that the others weren't in any better shape. Perhaps three

Diamonds would have been more effective. Harry and Hermione both reached down to help him up.

He surveyed the situation in order to distract himself from his leg, which he knew would keep him from getting much sleep that night. The floor was charred, the symbols Hermione and Flitwick had drawn so carefully burnt into the stone. But what attracted everyone's attention was the man crouched in the center of the scorched pentagram. A mop of dark hair hid the figure's face.

It had worked! Ron clutched Hermione's hand tighter, almost afraid to believe. The room seemed to be holding its collective breath as their excitement built.

Suddenly, the man's head snapped up and he rose to his feet in a single fluid motion. He was dressed elegantly in a green silk shirt and tie with a vest and coat of the purest black embroidered in dark thread with arcane symbols. A rosette was pinned to his lapel. The man stood deceptively still, but his eyes missed nothing as they quickly scanned the room.

His eyes! Ron gasped in shock at the sight of them. He'd thought himself prepared, but the reality was mind numbing. He could feel Harry tense next to him. They all knew the man's face as their own if not better, from the scar in the shape of a lightning bolt to the emerald eyes ensconced behind silver-framed glasses. But somehow the familiar features seemed alien. Ron had known Harry for over a decade now, had seen him brooding, angry, even vengeful, but the man inside the pentagram's face was blank, devoid of even the barest hint of emotion.

Those eyes at last found Harry. Emerald eyes met their twins, and for a moment it seemed as if the universe itself held its breath. Then the Man With a Rosette tilted his head inquisitively.

"My name is Harold Potter," he said. "Who might you be?"
