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## CHAPTER 1

# THE SUNSET

Relaxing in a recently conjured lawn chair, Harry Potter suddenly had a sense of feeling out of place, as though something was happening that was not supposed to be happening. The feeling only lasted a second, however. He quickly realized what it was, as he'd had it several times a day since coming to the Burrow from Hogwarts a week ago: it was summertime, and he was happy.

He smiled to himself as he wondered how long it would take for him to get used to the idea. Here I am, he thought, sitting outside in a lawn chair with Ginny, watching the sunset on a nice, warm summer evening, living in a house full of the people I feel closest to in the world. Last year on this day, he recalled, he was at 4 Privet Drive, surrounded by people who disliked him and who he disliked, isolated, and mourning the loss of his godfather, Sirius Black, for whose death he had felt responsible.

The thought caused his smile to fade, though he had long since accepted that he did not bear sole responsibility for what had happened. He still felt sad at having lost Sirius, but the feeling was now tempered by the certain knowledge that though Sirius was dead, his spirit still existed in a way Harry did not exactly understand. He knew now that no one who died was truly gone, since Albus Dumbledore had died a little over two weeks ago, but still had conversations with Harry as he slept. Harry didn't know how it worked, nor did he really care; what was important was that Dumbledore was not gone from Harry's life, and that Harry now knew from direct personal experience that death was not the end of existence.

Ginny moved her head up from where it had been resting on his shoulder, and kissed him lightly on the lips. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

“About how nice it is that I can kiss you any time I want,” he replied, knowing his answer would both please and annoy her.

“I meant before that, as you know very well,” she responded, though obviously happy with his answer.

He looked at the sunset again as he answered. “About what I was doing exactly a year ago right now, and it made me think of Sirius. I should ask Albus what Sirius is doing now.”

“Whatever it is, it’s probably something we couldn’t understand all that well,” she mused. “But at least he’s there, somewhere. I’m so glad you get to know that.” She rested her head on his shoulder again as he squeezed her shoulder gently.

“Me, too,” he agreed. “And I’m still having trouble adjusting to being happy in the summer, but I suppose I’ve had worse problems.” He paused, then after a minute, continued, “Funny how I never really stopped to look at sunsets before.”

“Must be one of those things having a girlfriend does to you,” said Ron with amusement, having just walked up behind them. “Next thing, you’ll be picking flowers and writing her love poetry.”

“That would be nice, but I’m happy with him the way he is,” said Ginny, looking at Harry rather than Ron. Harry looked up at Ron in mild annoyance, then leaned over and gave Ginny a lingering kiss, only partly to annoy Ron. She enthusiastically returned it, then looked up at her embarrassed brother and added, “Feel free to do that any time, Ron. It seems to work out well for me.”

“Yes, I see that,” responded Ron dryly. “Not that you two need much of an excuse. I think Mum sent me out here on purpose. She said something about wondering whether you could keep your lips off each other long enough to come in for dinner.”

“Bet she was smiling when she said it,” said Ginny confidently.

“I wasn’t looking at her face, but it wouldn’t shock me,” conceded Ron. “I swear, I’ve never seen her so happy as when she’s talking about you two. You could

start ripping each other's clothes off in the living room, and she'd say, 'look at them, they're so cute.'"

Ginny grinned at Harry mischievously. "Let's give it a try, find out for sure." He smiled but said nothing as they got up and headed to the house.

After a few steps, Ron gestured behind them. "Harry," he said, pointing to the lawn chair. "Mum's already mentioned about you leaving conjured furniture lying around. Surprised you didn't say anything," he added to Ginny as Harry took out his wand and caused the chair to disappear.

She shrugged. "I don't care if he leaves stuff lying around. I'm not going to nag him."

"Wow, now that's true love," said Ron with raised eyebrows. "Get that in writing, Harry. See if you can work it into her part of the wedding vows."

"To love, honor, cherish, and not to nag, till death do us part," joked Ginny.

"And then, only for a while," put in Harry. Ginny smiled at him as they walked into the house.

"Ah, making plans to be together after you die, I see," said Ron, shaking his head. "Is that something you can do?"

"Not sure, I'll have to ask Albus," said Harry. He hadn't thought of it before, but now he wondered how that worked. "If we can, then I feel kind of bad for him. He could move on and be with his wife, but he's hanging around to help me."

"Didn't you say he's comfortable where he is?" asked Ron.

"Yes, he did say that, and apparently his wife won't have to experience the passage of time to wait for him if she doesn't want to," explained Ginny. "But he has to, so Harry's right, it's really good of him."

They were greeted by Pansy and Hermione as they stood in the living room, waiting for Molly to announce that dinner was ready. "It's so funny how you call him 'Albus' all the time now," commented Pansy.

“I guess when you’re a spirit, words like ‘Professor’ or ‘Headmaster’ don’t quite have meaning like they used to,” said Harry. “It would just seem silly.” Harry almost added that Snape still referred to Dumbledore as ‘the headmaster,’ but at the last second didn’t, as mentioning Snape was a reminder of his duties helping Snape that most of the others weren’t allowed to know. “So, is Neville coming tonight?”

Just as Harry finished his question there was a small explosion in the fireplace, and Neville walked out. Hermione walked over and took his hand, then answered Harry’s question. “Yes, it’s Mondays and Fridays, and whatever other days I can pry him away from there. And I go there one of the weekend days.”

“You know I’d be here pretty much all the time if it was just up to me,” said Neville. “I sort of feel left out as it is, being the only one of the six of us not here.”

“It’s not such an awful thing, Neville,” pointed out Ron. “It just means you’re not a Weasley and your life’s not under dire threat. And Mum did offer, you remember. I’m sure it’s not too late to change your mind.” Harry recalled the conversation at the dinner table the previous Friday in which Molly had extended the offer to Neville. Neville had explained that he’d have liked to accept, but he didn’t want to leave his grandmother all alone. Watching Hermione during that conversation, Harry had the impression that the topic was one on which they’d disagreed; Harry wondered whether Hermione and Neville’s grandmother were having a tug-of-war over Neville’s time.

Molly walked into the room. “Hello, Neville, dear. Ron’s right, of course, but it’s sweet of you to think of your grandmother like that. Dinner’s ready, everyone.” They trooped into the dining room, where Arthur was already sitting at his usual spot. He greeted them as they sat down.

“How was work, Mr. Weasley?” asked Pansy. He raised his eyebrows at her. “Sorry, Arthur,” she corrected herself. Molly and Arthur had asked all the non-Weasleys to use their first names, as all were of age, or soon would be.

“Just the usual,” he sighed. “You’d think, with Voldemort still around and killing, people would find better things to do than mess around with Muggle stuff,

but apparently not. Today someone went to a Muggle shop that sells brooms, and turned them all into brooms that can fly. Not even very original, and of course they fly very poorly, so if a Muggle even tried... anyway, we didn't get the one who did it, but we're keeping our eyes open."

"So, I guess you do a lot of Memory Charms, then?" asked Neville.

Arthur grunted as he chewed a mouthful of chicken. "That's putting it mildly. If they paid me by the Memory Charm, we'd be rich. I've done it so much that I can tell if it's been done to someone recently even if I didn't know it was done. There's a certain look, it's very subtle, like they were thinking of something but can't quite remember what it was."

"You must be pretty good at it, then," said Neville.

Arthur smiled but said nothing. Ginny answered, "Sure, he is, Neville. I mean, we can't remember—"

Ron burst out laughing as Molly interrupted Ginny with a frustrated, "Please, Ginny, you know how long it took me to get your father to stop saying that, now don't you start." Harry noticed that Arthur was trying hard not to laugh.

As his laughter faded, Ron said, "Well, we have to explain it to them, they don't know what this is about." Molly shook her head and gave her daughter an annoyed look. Ron continued, "It's a joke Dad always used to make. Lots of people would at some point say what Neville said, and Dad would say, "Well, the kids can't remember all the times I beat them, so I guess so."

Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Pansy all chuckled. "The thing is," said Harry, "if Arthur was like, say, my uncle Vernon, it wouldn't be funny."

"Exactly, that's why it's funny," agreed Ginny. "Everyone knows Dad's the type that would never do that. It was never that funny to us kids, but only because we heard the joke so often. Ron only laughed because he knew it would annoy Mum."

“Such fine, wonderful children I have,” said Molly in a humorously wounded tone. “One tries to annoy me, the other laughs at it. They’ll have Harry doing it before long.”

“Well, you know, Molly,” said Harry, “We only tease the people we like. I really enjoyed it last year when the other teachers and the Aurors teased me, because I knew it meant they liked and accepted me.”

“I’m so pleased to be ‘accepted’ by my children,” said Molly, sounding earnest but obviously sarcastic. “It’s always been a dream of mine. Thank you, Harry, for helping me to see that.”

Harry smiled, pleased that she was teasing him now. “No problem.” He then saw the gleam in Ginny’s eye that he had come to know meant that a teasing remark was coming. Usually it was directed at him, but he didn’t think it would be this time.

“Ron, don’t you think that Hermione, Pansy, and Neville should be more ‘accepting’ of Mum?” she asked.

Ron and Arthur laughed. “Absolutely,” agreed Ron.

“Sorry, Molly,” said Hermione. “I’ve never even been all that ‘accepting’ of my own parents.”

“Good for you, dear,” replied Molly.

“Me neither,” put in Pansy, though she looked as though she wished she had the sort of relationship with her mother that Ginny had with Molly.

“If I ever tried to be ‘accepting’ of Gran, I would really regret it,” said Neville. Harry exchanged looks with Ron and Ginny, knowing that what Neville had said was possibly an understatement.

“Well, she struck me as a very sensible lady,” said Molly approvingly.

“So, Neville, how does she feel about your spending so much time over here?” asked Arthur casually. Neville looked slightly alarmed at the question, and Harry saw Hermione and Molly react. Apparently Arthur had unwittingly stumbled onto a sensitive subject, Harry thought.

Neville thought for a few seconds. “I guess you could say she has mixed feelings. She’s happy that I have Hermione, and the rest of you for friends, and I’m sure she understands that it’s very tempting for me to want to come over, since everyone else in the group is here. But she’s not used to me being gone so much in the summer, and I guess... it makes her feel like I’m leaving or something. I’m not sure, she doesn’t say it exactly.”

“I can certainly understand how she would feel,” said Molly. “I know the time will come when this house will be empty, and I’m not looking forward to it. That’s one of the reasons we had the bedrooms done this way, I’m hoping it’ll be a dormitory for visiting grandchildren.” Upon returning to the Burrow after the end of the last term, Harry, Ron, and Ginny had been surprised to discover that one of the changes made to the Burrow in May and June had been that walls had been taken out and four upstairs bedrooms had been made into two larger ones. Harry and Ron were now occupying one, and Hermione, Ginny and Pansy, the other.

None of the teenagers were inclined to comment on the topic of Neville’s situation, but Ginny seized on the mention of grandchildren; Harry wondered if she was trying to change the subject. “So, Mum, how soon did you want those grandchildren?”

Everyone grinned, including Molly, to Harry’s surprise. “I can wait,” she replied. Looking at Harry, she added, “I don’t know if you were trying to tease me or Harry with that, but it looks like you really got him.” Harry realized that his face must have been red.

“I was just thinking,” said Hermione, “it would be interesting if in, let’s say five years, all the Weasley children were married, and each couple had a child the same year. Eleven years later, they could fill up a Gryffindor dormitory, especially if they were mostly boys or mostly girls.”

“Oh, Hermione, you’re just getting my hopes up,” said Molly. “That would be lovely.”

“But they wouldn’t all necessarily be Gryffindors, would they?” asked Ron. “I mean, we all were, and you two were,” looking at his parents, “but suppose you had twenty grandchildren, they wouldn’t all be Gryffindors.”

Molly looked at Ron suspiciously. “Now I think you are trying to get me worked up. Twenty grandchildren... that’s my idea of heaven. Now, you’d better not talk like that unless you’re ready to do your bit.”

“Well, not yet, anyway,” allowed Ron. “Let’s see, that works out to... three and a third per person. Harry and Ginny are thinking of four, so maybe I can get away with only three to hold up my end.”

“Just like always, you try to slide by with the minimum effort necessary,” joked Hermione.

“I do not,” protested Ron, a bit feebly, Harry thought.

“Yeah, sure... I’ve seen you in the common room, asking her stuff before a big test or essay,” mocked Ginny. “I can see it now, on your wedding night, you’ll be calling her up... ‘Hermione, I wasn’t paying attention when it was explained to me, what is it I’m supposed to do, again?’” The table exploded with laughter from everyone except Ron, who Harry felt was annoyed, but knew he would be laughing if he hadn’t been the target.

“I’m not going to dignify that with a response,” said Ron loftily, as the laughter died down.

“Wise move, Ron,” chuckled Neville.

“I thought so,” agreed Ron.

“Would you like me to start a new subject, Ron,” offered Harry, “one that doesn’t involve making fun of you in any way?”

“That would be nice,” replied Ron, “although the way you say it doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence that that’ll actually happen.”

“I am serious, actually,” Harry assured him. “Arthur, Molly, I was thinking I’d like to invite a couple of people for dinner sometime, but I wanted to make sure it was okay with you first.”



“I’m sure it will be, dear,” said Molly. “Who were you thinking of?”

“One is John, John Smith, he’s the Muggle Studies teacher at Hogwarts,” Harry explained.

“Oh, he’s the really handsome one, right?” asked Molly.

Arthur raised an eyebrow, and Ron snickered. “So, what’s Dad, a goblin by comparison?”

“Of course not,” replied Molly, annoyed. “That was how Ginny described him, you know she has his class.”

“Well, that was before I was with Harry,” said Ginny. “Now, not only is Harry the most handsome man in the world, he is the only handsome man in the world, for my purposes. The best any other man can do would be to be considered ‘all right.’”

Harry looked at her quizzically, both pleased and embarrassed; it seemed like an odd thing for her to say. Ron looked at Harry appraisingly. “Well, he’s all right, I suppose, but—”

“Thank you, Ron,” Harry interrupted.

“Any time, mate. But why—”

Now Hermione interrupted. “Do I have to explain everything to you, Ron?”

“Not if you’re going to take that attitude,” said Ron defensively. “But you might have to explain it to Harry, I don’t think he gets it, either.”

“You see, Harry,” explained Hermione, “she’s letting you know that she’s not going to make comments to you about how handsome any other man is, and she expects you to do the same, not to talk to her about how extremely attractive some woman is.”

This had never occurred to Harry, but he supposed he could understand how it would make Ginny feel if he talked about how attractive some other woman was. He turned to Ginny and said, “Have I ever mentioned how totally beautiful you are, much more so than any other girl?”

Everyone smiled, including Ginny. “What about Cho?” she asked.

Feigning puzzlement, Harry instantly responded, “Cho who?”

Harry’s friends all laughed. “Right answer, Harry,” chuckled Hermione.

“He learns fast,” added Pansy.

Harry’s eyes were still on Ginny’s, and hers were on his; he could tell that she appreciated his answers even though she knew he was joking. “So, why do you want to invite John over, especially?” she asked.

“You call him ‘John?’” asked Arthur, surprised.

“He asks all his students to,” explained Hermione. “I think it’s just his personality, not anything to do with his being a Muggle especially.”

“Anyway,” Harry continued, addressing Arthur, “I like him, and thought during the year I’d like to get to know him better. Also, after last Christmas, when I told the teachers about the conversation we’d had about prisoners’ rights, and of course what you said, he said you sounded like someone he’d like to get to know.”

Molly smiled at her husband. “I like him better all the time.”

Arthur returned her smile. “That sounds good, Harry. Who was the other person you were thinking of?”

“Archibald Dentus,” said Harry, and he saw Arthur and Molly’s eyebrows rise. “I see you know who he is.”

“Oh, yes,” Arthur nodded. “You don’t get to be an undersecretary in the Ministry without everyone knowing who you are. I just didn’t know you knew him well enough to invite him to dinner. I just knew that he was the one who came with Fudge to get you to support the ARA in March.”

“He’s been sort of keeping his eyes open for me at the Ministry, watching out for things he knows I’d be concerned about,” Harry explained. “Not that you couldn’t, of course, but—”

“Not like he can, I couldn’t,” interrupted Arthur. “I can tell you what rank-and-file people are saying; he can tell you what top-level people are saying, which is much more important. What made you decide you could trust him?”

“Partly the way he comes across, much more like a real person than any kind of politician. Also, Albus said he was a friend, and more or less said I could trust him. I think he kind of felt sorry for me getting thrown into politics when I knew nothing about it, and wanted to help me. He partly lets me know what’s going on, and partly teaches me about politics. He knows I don’t really want anything to do with it, and manages to teach me about it while not making it seem like a lecture. He’s been very helpful.”

“What’s your impression of him, dear?” Molly asked her husband.

“He does more or less have a reputation as a straight shooter, or at least as much a one as you can be at that position,” said Arthur. “Obviously you have to be somewhat good at politics and infighting to even get to where he was. I didn’t have that strong an impression of him one way or another until he quit, which made my respect for him increase. Most people don’t walk away from that sort of job because of principles.”

“That’s probably because most people with principles don’t reach that position in the first place,” said Molly. Looking at Harry, she added, “I’m not talking about Dentus specifically, Harry, since I don’t know him. Maybe he’s the exception. I’ve just seen too much of the Ministry through Arthur’s eyes not to be jaded.”

“From everything Archibald’s said, I can understand that,” agreed Harry. “He did mention you once, Arthur. He said you were ‘a good man who would do the right thing.’”

Arthur smiled wryly. “I assume this was in the context of explaining why I’m still in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office.”

Harry nodded, glad that Arthur didn’t seem embarrassed about it. “He was explaining why it’s hard for good people to rise in the Ministry. His impression was that you wouldn’t want any part of the moral compromises necessary to advance.”

“He’s certainly right about that,” agreed Arthur. “Just don’t have a strong enough stomach, I suppose.”

“I wouldn’t want you any other way, dear,” Molly assured him. “Well, you arrange it, Harry, let us know when, and we’ll be ready. Oh, I don’t want to forget to tell you, Professor McGonagall called in the fireplace a little while ago, while you and Ginny were outside. I offered to go get you, but she knew I was cooking, and said it wasn’t urgent. She asked me to have you call her back after dinner. She wanted to talk to you and Hermione.”

“That’s odd,” said a puzzled Hermione. “Why the two of us? Could it be something to do with the fight with Voldemort a few weeks ago?”

“First thing that pops into my mind,” said Ron, “is that we’re looking at the next Head Boy and Girl. Why do you look so surprised, Hermione? It’s not as though you aren’t a lock for the job.”

“Don’t say that!” she admonished him.

“What, afraid I’ll jinx it? I thought you didn’t believe in superstitious jinxes,” retorted Ron, obviously happy to have touched a nerve.

“I don’t. Just don’t say it. Besides, I’m not a lock. At this point, you could make an excellent case for giving it to Pansy.”

“Me?” asked Pansy, surprised. “You must be kidding. Why would she pick me? My grades aren’t exactly fantastic.”

“As I told Harry last year, it’s not only about grades and responsibility, it’s about leadership. People know what you did for Harry last year, they know how hard it was. They really respect and admire you, I know that. I mean, one night in our dormitory, Parvati and Lavender were telling me how they couldn’t believe what you did, that it was so amazing. Let’s put it this way: if it were decided by a vote, you’d win.”

“Well, it’s not, so that’s not important,” responded Pansy. “I think you’re wrong, Hermione, and that’s not something I’ve said very often. Tell you what.” She reached into her purse, pulled out some gold coins, and put them on the table. “Five Galleons. If I’m made Head Girl, I give you five Galleons. If it’s you, you give me five Galleons.” She raised her eyebrows at Hermione and waited for an answer.

Harry and Ron chuckled at the uncomfortable position Pansy had put Hermione in. Harry knew that if Hermione declined the bet, she was more or less admitting that Pansy was right, and if she accepted it, she would probably lose. Looking unhappy, she thought for a few seconds, then said hesitantly, “Look, you know I don’t approve of gambling...”

Hermione’s five friends laughed, and Pansy put away her money. “I’m sorry, Hermione, I didn’t mean to make you that uncomfortable,” she said. “But you have to recognize reality. You could just say, ‘I know I’m the logical choice, but I don’t want to get my hopes up,’ we would understand that. But if you say that you might not get it, you’re just begging for people to argue with you.”

“Harry, Neville, you’re always telling us about the things the Aurors bet on,” said Ron. “What would they give for odds on this?”

Harry looked at Neville, and both shook their heads; Harry decided to answer the question in case Neville might get in trouble with Hermione for answering. “I don’t think they’d even take bets on it, the odds would be so high against anyone but Hermione. Someone might throw a few Galleons on a twenty-to-one long shot, but probably not. The funny thing is, in any other year, Pansy would be the obvious choice. Just not this year.”

“Okay, let’s talk about Head Boy, then,” said Hermione, changing the subject. “Did you mean to say, Ron, that you think Harry will be Head Boy?”

Ron shrugged. “If she called about making you Head Girl, then she’s probably also decided to make Harry Head Boy. Of course, we thought it was unlikely because he’s a teacher. But you never know, I suppose. Harry would obviously be a lock if he wasn’t a teacher.”

“Well, I would ask Harry what he thinks, but I’m not so mean as to make him give an opinion on his own chances—”

“Yeah, but unlike you, I’m hoping I don’t get it,” Harry interrupted. “I already have way more than enough to do. If she tries to give it to me, I’ll do my best to talk her out of it.”

“Well, anyway, Neville, you can handicap the Head Boy situation,” Hermione suggested. “What do you think?”

Neville thought. “This one is harder, because of Harry being a teacher, so it’s unpredictable. Just the kind of thing the Aurors like. I think that Ernie would be the favorite, at even money. I’d put Harry and Ron at four to one each, and I’d make Anthony and Justin long shots, maybe fifteen to one.”

“Hadn’t thought of Justin,” said Pansy. “I can see it, though. But you are forgetting one person.” She smiled at Harry. “What do you think that person’s odds are, Harry?”

Harry smiled back. “Hard to say. Six to one, is my best guess. Maybe I can get McGonagall to tell me afterwards if she considered him.”

“I don’t think he’s any less likely than me,” said Ron. “Maybe five to one for each of us. I don’t think McGonagall’s forgotten first year, when he got those last ten points for us.”

“You mean me?” Neville blurted out, then scoffed. “Yeah, right. I’ve got about as much chance as Blaise Zabini.”

“Hmmm... he will be the only Slytherin seventh year boy, so it’s always possible,” joked Pansy.

“I kind of find myself hoping it’s Ernie, if only because he wants it so much, and he’s the only one who does,” said Harry. “He’ll be crushed if he doesn’t get it.”

“You don’t want it, Ron?” asked Molly, surprised.

Ron shrugged. “If I get it, that’s okay, but no, I guess I don’t really care. I’m Quidditch captain, I’d rather be that than Head Boy anyway. Being Head Boy isn’t going to get me all excited or anything.”

No one said anything to that; Harry wondered if Ron was thinking of Percy, and if others were saying nothing for the same reason. The dinner concluded with only sporadic, casual conversation.

After dinner, Harry and Hermione walked over to the fireplace. They couldn't both put their heads in, of course, so they agreed that Harry would do it. He leaned in and shouted the name of the fireplace in McGonagall's quarters at Hogwarts.

"Hello, Harry, thank you," McGonagall said pleasantly. "I wondered if you and Hermione would come see me this evening, the earlier the better if you are free."

"Sure," Harry agreed. "How should we get there?"

"Normally, I would meet you at the Hogsmeade Owl Office and walk to the school with you, but as of now, security is an issue for both you and Hermione. I don't like to impose on Fawkes, but I'm sure you understand, and he does as well, that you're in danger every time you appear in public unguarded, even for a short time."

"I understand," said Harry. Humorously, he added, "I have a feeling he knew what he was getting into when he chose me. We'll be there in a minute." He exited the fireplace and told Hermione they would be using Fawkes.

"Did you ask her what it was about?" asked Hermione anxiously.

Harry shook his head. "I've dealt with her enough to know that if I asked, she'd say something like 'you'll find out when you get here.'"

"I guess so," agreed Hermione. "Well, I'm ready. Aren't you going to call Fawkes?"

Fawkes burst into view, his tail feathers sticking out. "I don't have to, really, it's just a matter of his being aware that I'm ready." He put an arm around Hermione and she one around him, and they both reached for Fawkes's tail. Fawkes lifted off, and instantly, they were in McGonagall's living quarters.

"Ah, thank you, Harry and Hermione, and thank you too, Fawkes," said McGonagall, addressing Fawkes politely. Fawkes settled on Harry's shoulder. "Please sit down," she said, gesturing them to the sofa. "Are you having good summers so far?"

“Yes, thank you, Professor,” said Hermione politely. Harry could tell that she was eager for McGonagall to come to the point, though she would never press McGonagall.

“Mine’s been really good,” said Harry, with spontaneous enthusiasm. “Of course, my summers are usually terrible, so that may not be saying much. But I’m happy.”

“Yes, I see that,” said McGonagall with a very small smile. “Well, I should come to the point of why I asked you here. Miss Granger, I have to believe it will not shock you to know that you have been appointed to the post of Head Girl for this year.”

“Thank you, Professor,” exhaled Hermione, who Harry felt was equally happy and relieved.

“Is it all right if I say ‘we told you so’ now?” asked Harry. She looked at him sourly as Harry explained the gist of their earlier conversation to McGonagall. She shook her head in mock disapproval.

“You do stand a risk of picking up the Aurors’ bad habits,” she said soberly. “So tell me, then, how was the Head Boy race handicapped?” Smiling, Harry told her. “An astute analysis,” offered McGonagall. “But Mr. Longbottom failed to include himself in the consideration. You may let him know, if you wish, that I could have appointed him to the post with no indecision or regret. But he is correct, I have chosen Mr. Macmillan for the position. I see you are not disappointed, Harry.”

“More like relieved,” agreed Harry. “Saves me an argument.”

She favored him with a strict expression. “You will find that arguing with me is likely to be a fruitless endeavor. Now, as to why you are here... you are here in your capacity as a Hogwarts professor, not a student. There is a personnel matter on which I would appreciate your input.” Harry glanced at Hermione; he was surprised she was being allowed to sit in on such a meeting. “The reason for Miss Granger’s continued presence will become clear as we proceed, Professor,” she said.



“I don’t mind, obviously,” clarified Harry. “Oh, but when you mentioned personnel, that reminded me... there was something Albus wanted me to tell you, that he told me last night. Apparently, he’s discovered recently that from where he is, he can... ‘commune’ is the word he uses, with ghosts. He can communicate with them with thoughts, not just words, like we can. He says communication is much faster and clearer than it is with us. Anyway, he talked about this for some time, but to jump to the end of the story, apparently Professor Binns has decided to move on to the spiritual realm. He won’t be coming back.”

McGonagall, looking frustrated, raised an eyebrow. “And Albus persuaded him to do this?”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t agree with the word ‘persuaded,’” said Harry. “More like, that Professor Binns and he talked, and Professor Binns realized some things. He said, ‘please suggest to Minerva that she see this as a positive thing for Professor Binns, rather than as an annoyance to her.’”

“Easy for him to say,” grunted McGonagall. “He’s not the one who has to find a new History of Magic professor. Well, you can tell Albus that I am pleased for the sake of Professor Binns’ immortal soul, but it does not help my situation any.”

“You know, Professor, you can tell him yourself,” explained Harry. “He’s told me that all you, all anybody, whether living or dead, has to do is think of him in a focused way. Imagine that you’re talking directly to him, and he’ll notice, and hear you.”

“Thank you, Harry. Yes, I do imagine I will have a thing or two to say to him. He didn’t happen to make any suggestions that I would find helpful, did he?”

“This was the strange thing,” said Harry. “He said that I would help you. I have no idea how; he said it would come to me. I was annoyed at him, too. He knew I was, of course, and he just smiled. I don’t know how he can know that, since he can’t know the future, but...” Harry trailed off, and suddenly looked startled.

“What is it, Harry?” asked Hermione, concerned.

Smiling, Harry shook his head. “It just came to me. I had a thought during dinner, something that popped into my head, and I forgot again because I was following the conversation. It’s more like intuition, I guess. I was thinking about Archibald, you know, Archibald Dentus, and I suddenly had this thought, ‘he’d make a good History of Magic teacher.’ Like I said, it just went right out of my head again, but I’m sure that’s what Albus was talking about. I probably would have suggested him eventually anyway, but I guess Albus was telling me it was a good idea.”

McGonagall looked intrigued. “Is he qualified? Not just anyone can teach History of Magic, you know, former Ministry undersecretary or no.”

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted. “That’s the kind of thing you can find out more easily than I could, I imagine. Or, I could ask him at dinner, if he comes. I was planning to ask him and John over for dinner one night. I could ask him about history, find out what he knows, what he studied.”

“An amusing notion, a sixteen-year-old conducting a job interview for a sixty-something-year-old. Do you think it’s something he would want to do, or agree to do?”

“I don’t know that either. It just seemed like a good idea. He’s kind of retired right now, but maybe he’d agree to do it for a few years until we find someone else.”

“Well, we shall consider him as a possibility, then,” said McGonagall in conclusion. “I will make a few discreet inquiries, perhaps I can dig up his school records from a half-century ago.

“Now, if I may move on, as I was saying, there was a personnel matter to be attended to. A few things will be changing now that I am the headmistress, and one of them is that I can no longer function as the Head of House for Gryffindor. I am certain you can see that it would be a conflict of interest for me to continue in that role.”

“Yes, I can see that,” agreed Harry. “So, who’s going to be the new Head of House?”

“That is what I wanted your input on, Professor,” said McGonagall. “I will go over the roster of teachers with you, and get your thoughts. Please keep in mind that it is very important that the Head of House be a teacher who was in that House as a student.” Harry nodded; he had always understood that was the case.

“Firstly, we have Professors Snape, Flitwick, and Sprout, all heads of other houses. Proceeding down the roster in order of seniority, we have Professor Sinistra, whose house was Slytherin. Professor Svengard, who as you know teaches Study of Ancient Runes, was a Ravenclaw.”

“Professor,” interjected Hermione as McGonagall paused between sentences, taking care not to interrupt, “it’s beginning to look like—”

McGonagall had no compunctions about interrupting Hermione. “Miss Granger, will you please hold your thoughts until the roster is completed?” Looking abashed, Hermione looked down and was silent. McGonagall continued. “Professor Vector, also a Ravenclaw...”

Now Harry spoke during a pause. “There are a lot of Ravenclaws, aren’t there?”

McGonagall nodded. “This is often a problem. As Ravenclaw is the most academically oriented House, a greater-than-usual proportion of teachers will be from there. Continuing... Professor Trelawney, yet another Ravenclaw.” Harry was relieved; he didn’t want to think of her being a Head of House. “Next, we have John, who of course cannot be considered because he did not attend Hogwarts, is not magical, and belonged to no house. Next, we have Professor Hagrid.”

“He was in Gryffindor, wasn’t he?” Harry asked hopefully. McGonagall nodded. Thinking about how good it would be, Harry had a sudden realization. “Damn... it would be great, but he can’t do it, can he. He wouldn’t be able to enter the common room.”

“Unfortunately, a necessary element of being a Head of House,” confirmed McGonagall. “Who is next on the list... ah, yes, the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor.” She looked up at Harry, a hint of amusement in her eyes. Harry glanced over at Hermione, who was smiling.

He suddenly realized what was happening. I don't believe this, he thought. He sighed, and thought for another minute; neither McGonagall nor Hermione spoke. Finally, he looked at McGonagall plaintively. “There's no other way?”

“If you can think of one, I am all ears,” replied McGonagall.

“Obviously, you know there isn't,” said Harry. “You knew this when you called this afternoon. Why didn't you just tell me straight out?”

McGonagall looked at him as if he were overlooking something obvious. “And what would your reaction have been? Just because arguing with me will be fruitless does not mean I want to encourage you to do it. I would have had to explain it to you this way anyway; I just chose to do it before the argument rather than after.”

“And Hermione is here in case I didn't listen to you?”

McGonagall shrugged lightly. “She would not be here had I not had something to tell her as well, but I felt it was convenient. In any case... please keep in mind that being Head of House is a serious responsibility. You will be in charge of all students in your House, in a very important way. Should someone misbehave in a serious fashion, for example, the decision to expel or not expel them will rest with you.”

“Let's hope it doesn't come to that,” said Harry. “I still remember you and Albus threatening to expel me, in second year.”

“If we are fortunate, no one will fly a car into Hogwarts this year,” responded McGonagall. “But I will tell you a little secret. Our threats notwithstanding, there were no circumstances under which we would have actually expelled you.” Obviously amused at Harry's surprised expression, she continued, “Despite not knowing for certain whether Voldemort would return, we knew it was

highly likely that you would play an important role in future events, so your not becoming a fully trained wizard was simply not an option. At the same time, it was necessary to impress on you in the strongest possible terms that flying a car onto the Hogwarts grounds was unacceptable. So, we... fibbed a little.”

Harry smiled. “I guess I can understand that, from your point of view. But the funny thing is, I don’t think it would have made that much difference. Generally, I didn’t break the rules just for the heck of it, but because there was a really good reason. Maybe Ron and I didn’t actually need to fly the car to Hogwarts, but we thought we did.”

“A really good reason?” asked Hermione. “What about Hogsmeade, third year?”

Somewhat chagrined, Harry replied, “Well, I did say, ‘generally.’” He explained to McGonagall what he had done; she shook her head in disbelief.

“So, you knew, or rather, thought, that there was a madman on the loose who wanted nothing better than to kill you, but you snuck into Hogsmeade anyway, putting yourself at great risk. If that did not dissuade you from taking such chances, it’s not surprising that our threats did not. In any case, it will now be your job to make sure that no Gryffindor students behave anywhere near as foolishly and rashly as you did. Do you think you can do that?”

“I don’t see myself as much of a disciplinarian,” he admitted. “Maybe I’ll just try to reason with them. Of course, then they’ll probably just say, ‘yes, but you did it before.’ If they know about all the stuff I did, that is. The younger ones might not know.”

“They know,” said Hermione confidently. “Pansy told me this in the notebooks in March. Apparently one consequence of the first years liking you so much was that they went around the school asking everybody, even seventh years they didn’t know, what they knew about what you had done. I’m pretty sure that by now, they know everything that was known by anyone outside the six of us.”

“Well, with any luck, I won’t have to threaten anyone,” Harry said hopefully. “I have a feeling our Head Girl will keep them in line.”

“Sure, now that it benefits you that I like to follow the rules...” She turned to McGonagall. “I wish I had a Galleon for every time he broke the rules after I told him not to.”

“A few of those were your idea,” Harry pointed out. “The Polyjuice Potion, for example—”

“Harry!” exclaimed Hermione, giving him a wounded and accusatory look.

“I don’t think we’re going to get in trouble for it, it’s been four and a half years. Besides, you told her about me going into Hogsmeade.” He then explained to a very curious McGonagall what had happened.

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Very impressive, for a second year; many N.E.W.T. students have trouble with that. Well then, Hermione, I suppose I need not tell you to look in on Moaning Myrtle’s restroom every now and then to check for rule-breaking. Then again, perhaps I will mention that to Albus tonight... perhaps he can ‘commune’ with her as well, and we can get that restroom back in service.”

“He’ll probably say that you’re not looking at it from a very spiritual point of view,” joked Harry.

“Yes, well, I will be happy to leave the spiritual considerations to him,” agreed McGonagall. “Now, getting back to your new position, there are a few other things you should think about. One is that fifth-year prefects must be chosen; I will want your recommendations no later than the end of July. Another is that you now have ultimate responsibility for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Ironically, though you report to Mr. Weasley as captain, he will now report to you as Head of House. You have the authority to make any decision involving the team, including choosing players. I have tended to leave such decisions to the captain; for the sake of convenience, not to mention your friendship with Mr. Weasley, I would advise you to do the same.

“There is another Quidditch-related matter which should be brought to your attention. You will recall that at the beginning of your second year, Lucius Malfoy provided seven top-of-the-line brooms to the Slytherin Quidditch team. Professors Sprout, Flitwick, and myself all protested this rather loudly, feeling that it would give Slytherin an unfair advantage. Professor Snape responded that the principle was no different than my providing you with a Nimbus 2000 in your first year, and Professor Dumbledore agreed with him and took no action. I admit that I ceased protesting when you were given the Firebolt, but Professors Flitwick and Sprout have continued to formally request, at the beginning of each school year, that privately owned brooms be disallowed for use in Quidditch, and that school-owned brooms be distributed equally among all four teams. Professor Dumbledore’s response has been that all four Heads of House must agree, and of course, Professor Snape never has. Professors Flitwick and Sprout yesterday renewed their request, pointing out that the Gryffindor team will be using two Firebolts this year. They did, you should know, ask me to mention to you that their request has no connection to their personal affection for you. In any case, though it is quite unlikely that Professor Snape’s attitude will change, you must decide on your stance, as you now represent Gryffindor House.”

Harry hadn’t imagined that he would ever have to make this kind of decision. “Ron would go crazy if I agreed,” he said, half to himself. “I know I can’t let that decide it for me, of course. Well, okay, I’ll think about it. Is there anything else I should know, or think about, right now?”

She reached over to an end table near her for a small book, which she handed to Harry. The cover read, simply, ‘Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: The Complete School Rules.’ “Read that carefully; you should be able to quote from it by the time you are finished.”

Harry thought to respond, “No need, I can ask Hermione if I need to know anything,” but held back at the last second, realizing a long and serious lecture

would be forthcoming at such an attempt at humor. Instead, he nodded and said nothing. “Don’t worry, Professor, I’ll quiz him on it,” said Hermione.

“Unfortunately, she’s not joking,” added Harry.

“Excellent. Another good reason to have her here,” said McGonagall.

“Well, I will let you two get back to the Burrow, unless either of you has any questions.”

“I just wanted to say, Professor, how honored I am that you chose me, and you know I’ll do the very best job I can,” said Hermione exuberantly.

“Well, I would be honored that you chose me,” said Harry, “if it weren’t for the fact that there was no other choice, and that it wasn’t something I wanted, and—”

“Yes, thank you, Harry,” interrupted McGonagall, looking annoyed. “It should please you to know that you are not alone in feeling put upon by unsought duties; Deputy Headmaster Snape has had a few sarcastic comments as well. He is finding the assembling of the schedule even more unpleasant than I did.”

“Great, I’ll probably have two twelve-hour days,” said Harry. “Better him than me, though.”

“He said something similar, actually,” said McGonagall. “What was it exactly... I will be doubly pleased when the Dark Lord is defeated, for I will derive great pleasure in handing over this mess to Professor Potter.”

“I haven’t said I would stay on,” protested Harry.

“It appears that he assumes that you will,” she observed, giving him a look he had often seen from Hermione, suggesting that she knew more than he did.

“Oh, and that reminds me, there is another thing for you to consider. Now that you will be teaching N.E.W.T. classes, you must decide what O.W.L. score you will require of students who wish to join your N.E.W.T. class.”

“I don’t have to think about that,” he replied quickly. “Anybody can join, even if they failed their O.W.L.”

“Are you sure? There are reasons for having such standards.”



“I know, but I really see this as something that’s essential,” he argued, suddenly more animated than he’d been all evening. “I know that not everybody will end up having to use it, but especially considering the situation these days, I’d hate to say no to someone, then have them suffer for it later on. If somebody’s having trouble, I’ll just try to help them as best I can.”

“Well,” said McGonagall, “I am glad to see that you have a passion for teaching, even if you do not for being a Head of House.”

Harry had a sudden thought. “Let me ask you, what were Albus’s standards for the class last year?”

“As you obviously suspect, the same as yours,” she conceded.

“There you are,” he concluded, pleased to have it confirmed that he had made the right choice. “Okay, we’ll be getting back, I guess. Oh, and Professor... I may not be thrilled, but I will do the best I can.”

She nodded understandingly. “As do we all, Harry. Have a good evening, both of you.” They said their goodbyes, and grabbed Fawkes’s tail again.

They were suddenly in the living room of the Burrow, surrounded by all the current residents and Neville. No one asked them, but they all looked at Harry and Hermione expectantly. Harry gestured to Hermione.

“Well, I’m the Head Girl, and Harry’s the new Head...” She trailed off, obviously wanting them to reach the wrong conclusion, “... of House, for Gryffindor.” Harry and Hermione enjoyed the stunned expressions they saw.

Molly jumped up off the sofa and rushed to Harry. “Harry, dear, that’s wonderful!” She hugged him, and he was pleased she was happy, at least. “Head of House, at age sixteen! My goodness... and Hermione, we’re proud of you, too, dear,” she continued, releasing Harry and hugging a pleased Hermione.

“Wow,” said Pansy. “I guess it makes sense, probably there aren’t many teachers who used to be Gryffindors. What about Head Boy?”

“Never bet against the favorite,” responded Harry. He went on to tell them what McGonagall had said, and was glad to see that Neville looked proud. He

and Hermione sat down and told them the rest of what had happened. As they talked, Harry wondered how he would handle being Head of House. Just when I get used to one thing, he thought, another gets shoved in my lap.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day was completely free for Harry, as it was Tuesday, and his summer training days with the Aurors were Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. In the morning, Pansy, Hermione, and Ginny went to Diagon Alley to look around, while Harry and Ron stayed around the Burrow. They played some chess, then practiced dueling, which they found they did a lot when they had time. Ron had joked to Harry that he now knew how Harry felt when they played chess, as Ron couldn't come near defeating Harry at dueling. Harry was happy to practice with Ron anyway, though; if Ron's grasp of tactics in dueling became as good as those he used in chess, Harry could still learn from dueling with him, even if Harry's strength was overpowering.

After the girls returned, they had lunch. Harry sat with Ginny in the living room, greatly enjoying the idea that he had nothing to do. He knew that he should make no such comment to Hermione, since she would suggest that he start on the rulebook. He did intend to study it, but he felt he deserved at least another week of relative leisure first.

Molly announced that she was going out shopping, and Hermione decided to go with her. After they left, Ginny leaned into Harry and whispered, "Why don't you call Fawkes, we can take a little trip."

He raised his eyebrows. "I thought we were going to talk to Molly about that first."

"It's okay," she said. "I'll explain when we get there."

Fawkes suddenly appeared, and Pansy walked in. Seeing Fawkes, she smiled at them. "Have fun, you two," she said teasingly.

“I think we will,” said Ginny, smiling. They grabbed Fawkes’s tail, and were suddenly in the bedroom of Dumbledore’s former living quarters, now officially Harry’s. They sat on the bed and kissed, which they did a lot, especially when they were alone.

“So, what about Molly?” asked Harry.

“Well, I hope you won’t be unhappy that I did this, but I had the talk with her by myself,” explained Ginny, checking his face for a reaction. He just nodded, letting her know he wasn’t bothered. “I figured you wouldn’t exactly be upset. Funny, you can talk about love easily, no problem, but you still get all embarrassed about sex.” She smiled as she noticed him react with discomfort at her use of the word.

“Give me some time, I just have to get used to it,” said Harry. “I’m glad that both of us aren’t embarrassed about it. So, what did she say?”

“It just sort of came up naturally, so I decided to talk to her about it. Like I kind of expected, she had a mixed reaction. On the one hand, she loves that we’re together, and knows that we’re going to want to do some sexual things; she’s not bothered by that. She even said, ‘If your father and I’d had a phoenix and a private place to go, at your age...’ She didn’t finish the sentence, but it was obvious what she meant. And she knows that since we had the Joining of Hands done, we’re committed. Basically, she’d have no problem with us doing anything we wanted, except for my age. I’m two months away from sixteen, so it’s hard for her to just say she approves of our going off together and doing whatever we feel like.”

“I suppose I can understand that,” he said. “I wouldn’t know, but I’d have to imagine that she’s being more understanding about it than most parents would be, especially parents of a fifteen-year-old.”

“Yeah, but it’s mostly because it’s you,” Ginny pointed out. “If it was anyone else, I’m sure she’d be reacting like I assume most mothers would... ‘not until you’re seventeen,’ that sort of thing. And since we’re committed, you could say it doesn’t really matter whether we do something now, or in two months, or when

I'm seventeen. So anyway, the way we left it was like this: she knows we're going to come here sometimes, but she wants us to either let her know, or if she isn't around, make sure someone at home knows. It's understandable that she doesn't want to come home and have no idea where we are, of course. And she knows she can have one of the others call us on our pendants if she really wants to. She said she'll do that if we go off and forget to tell anyone.

"But as for what we do when we're here... she basically accepts the idea that she can't control that, and she's not even sure she'd want to. She leaves it to our judgment, what we're comfortable with. Her bottom line was, 'whatever you do, don't get pregnant,' which obviously I had no intention of doing anyway. So, if we decide we want to... do everything, I have to go to St. Mungo's first."

His eyebrows narrowed in puzzlement. "Why?"

"There's a spell you can have done there," she explained. "It's a spell that prevents pregnancy, and it can be done so it lasts anywhere from a month to a year. It's simple, quick, and safe; lots of witches go there every year to get it updated. I was thinking I'd go do it even if we don't make a particular decision, just so it's not a danger that we get carried away and do something we end up regretting. I've heard that once you get started in that direction, it can be hard to stop." She grinned and touched his cheek; he leaned in and they kissed again.

"I can believe that," he said. "Just kissing makes me feel that way. But then, of course, there's the other aspect of our situation, the one Molly doesn't know about."

Nodding somberly, Ginny moved over to the center of the bed and lay down. She pulled Harry over so he lay next to her. They kissed briefly, and he stroked her hair. As he did, she spoke again. "You saw how Pansy smiled at us when we left. As far as she's concerned, we can go here and be carefree, do what we want. It would be so nice if that were true." Seeing his expression, she added, "And don't worry, I don't blame you. It's not like this was your idea. So, how do you think we're going to do this?"

“I’m not sure,” he said. “All I know is, I really want to do stuff with you.” Embarrassment at what he was about to say made him pause, but he knew that she wanted him to show more enthusiasm; he felt it, but had a hard time verbalizing it, and conveying it with actions was difficult as well, given the circumstances. He plowed ahead. “If it wasn’t for... the situation, I’d be working on getting your clothes off.”

He felt himself flush as he said it, but her delighted grin made him feel better. “If it wasn’t for the situation,” she assured him, “my clothes would already be off, and so would yours. I’d have attacked you as soon as we got here.”

He grinned broadly, now flush with pleasure. He understood why she was frustrated with his shyness, since her enthusiasm felt so good. His grin faded, however, as he focused on the reality of their situation. “Well, good as that sounds, maybe the thing to do is treat it like going into a cold swimming pool, from the shallow end. Put a foot in, then a little more, get accustomed to it. That sort of thing. What do you think?”

She nodded. “It makes sense.” Smiling a little, she added, “No point in just sitting here talking, since we can do that at the Burrow.” She leaned over to kiss him, and as the kiss continued, he couldn’t help thinking how much more comfortable this was than the couples’ places at Hogwarts. After another minute, he felt her hand moving around inside his robes, and he felt his do the same with her reflexively, almost without his conscious thought. He wondered how far into the water they would go.

Two hours later, they let go of Fawkes as he appeared in the living room of the Burrow. The room’s only occupant was Hermione, who was reading a large, thick book, which she put down when she saw them. Her expression was a mix of pleasure and sympathy. “I find myself wanting to ask ‘how did it go,’ but I know I shouldn’t.”

Ginny nodded. "I can see why. Don't worry, I know you don't want to hear details any more than we'll want to tell you. I guess the answer is, as well as can be expected, considering. We know it may take some time."

"I really do feel for both of you, you know," said Hermione. "When Molly and I got back, she asked where you were, and Pansy told us. They were smiling, especially Pansy, you know, in this nudge-nudge kind of way. I know how they think it is for you, and I know how it really is. I do think you'll get past it, though," she added, obviously trying to be encouraging.

Harry appreciated her support. "We think so, too. Albus says it's just a matter of changing how we think. I'm sure he's right, but it's easier said than done. It's still really nice to be alone, though, in comfortable surroundings. It'll seem strange to go back to the couples' places in September."

"Will we have to?" wondered Ginny. "Couldn't we just go to your office, and then take Fawkes to your quarters?"

"That has to be against all kinds of rules, doesn't it? Hermione?"

"Go look it up," she urged him. "You've got the rule book, you need to start learning it anyway. What better time than when you actually want to know something?"

He sighed. "I was hoping to wait a week before I even looked at it, give myself a break. All right, I'll go get it."

He headed up the stairs, noticing how much firmer and more comfortable they felt since the Weasleys had had them reconstructed as part of the work done on the house to make it more secure. He walked to Ron's bedroom, or what seemed more like the boys' dormitory now, grasped the handle, and found it locked. He turned it in surprise, figuring Ron had made a mistake.

"Ron!" he shouted through the door. "The door's locked."

Harry thought he heard a sigh from the other side. "Brilliant observation, Harry," Ron shouted back. "Now, go away."

Another voice came through the door. “Hi, Harry,” shouted Pansy cheerfully.

All right!, thought Harry. Laughing, he said, “Maybe I should come back later.”

Through the door, Harry heard Ron say, in a normal tone, “That’s our Harry, nothing gets by him. Mind like a steel trap.”

Still chuckling, Harry headed back down the stairs. Sitting down on the sofa next to Ginny, he said, “There seems to be a problem with getting the rule book right now.”

“Yes, I knew that, of course,” said Hermione. “That was just my way of letting you know what was going on.”

Harry laughed again. “I’m sure Ron would be thrilled to hear that.”

“Well, let’s not mention that to him, no need to aggravate him. Besides, it didn’t seem right, you being the last to know.”

“But I was, anyway, right?”

“No, Neville doesn’t know yet,” said Hermione. “I’ll have to tell him, or he’ll never find out, since Ron’ll never tell him.” She paused. “I hope they work out.”

“You think they might not?” asked Harry, surprised.

Hermione shrugged. “I’m just a little worried,” she explained. “Pansy’s kind of sensitive about some things, and Ron’s kind of...”

“Insensitive?” suggested Ginny.

Hermione nodded. “Like, if he brings up her past once, in a critical way, then that’s it, they’re done.”

“He wouldn’t be so stupid,” Harry asserted. “No way.”

Ginny’s face took on a ‘well, maybe’ expression. “We hope you’re right, but people are bound to get in fights, and often they look for hurtful things, not even consciously. It could be out of his mouth before he knows it.”

“Remember fifth year, Harry, when we asked you about those dreams, and you made that nasty crack about Ron’s skills as a Keeper? That really hurt him,” Hermione reminded him. “You weren’t thinking about that, you just wanted us off your back. That’s a good example of how that can happen.”

“That was a really hard time for me,” said Harry defensively. “But I suppose I see your point, he could be having a hard time at some point. She couldn’t forgive him if he blurted it out, just once?”

Hermione looked doubtful. “You know how fragile her ego is, Harry. It’s gotten better lately, probably partly because of our support and the support the school gave her after Easter, but... it’s like she’s trying to build a new self-image. One comment like that from someone she cares about, and it could fall apart, at least for a while. She just might not be in any condition to forgive him. It’s hard to know.”

“Well, let’s hope it doesn’t happen,” said Ginny. “Oh, Harry, while you were upstairs, Hermione came up with a good idea for helping us with our little problem.”

Hermione gave Ginny an annoyed glance. “I was just kidding, Ginny.”

“I thought it wasn’t a bad idea,” responded Ginny. To Harry, she continued, “She said she should do Memory Charms on both of us so we’d forget about the thing with Snape, then we’d go off to your Hogwarts quarters blissfully ignorant and do what we wanted. Then she’d remove the charm when we got back, and that would be that. There’d be no reason for us to worry after that, because it would be out there, so to speak.”

Harry chuckled as he listened. “I can see the appeal of it,” he agreed. “But can you do... of course you can, sorry, Hermione, I forgot who I was talking to.”

“I know how to do them, but that’s not the same as being able to, since I’ve never done it before, obviously,” she explained. “I wouldn’t want to try it out on you two. You can do them now, can’t you, Harry?”



“Yeah, the Aurors taught Neville and I, since it’s a pretty basic thing for an Auror. A few Aurors volunteered to let us practice on them. Simple things first, like you tell them a number and make them forget it, moving up to more complicated things. Obviously, we got a big lecture about only using it in one’s capacity of being an Auror, and not, for example, use it on you so you’d forget about that time I snuck into Hogsmeade, and wouldn’t be able to tell McGonagall about it.”

“Well, you told her about the Polyjuice Potion,” she countered.

“You did yours first, so I thought it was all right. Anyway, she was disappointed with what I did, but impressed with what you did.”

“It must be that I break the rules more virtuously than you do,” she said in a deliberately superior tone.

“Must be,” Harry said, pretending to concede the argument. Anyway—“ He stopped speaking as his pendant started to vibrate in a particular pattern. It had been set up to vibrate rather than blink so that others wouldn’t know that someone was calling Harry if he was in a position where he would have to explain. He held the pendant up and spoke into it. “Hello, Professor. I’ll be there in a few minutes.” He shrugged at Ginny and Hermione. “Should I go outside, or—”

“No, it’s okay, we’ll go into the kitchen,” said Hermione. They knew that he always took a few minutes to focus on love and get into the proper state of mind before seeing Snape, and it was better for him to be alone to do it. Ginny walked over and gave him an energetic kiss. Breaking off, she touched his face and said, “That ought to help you get into a loving frame of mind.”

“It actually gets me into the frame of mind I was in for most of the last few hours,” Harry said with a smile. “But I’m not complaining.” Ginny and Hermione went into the kitchen, and Harry closed his eyes and concentrated.

Harry walked into Snape’s office. “Hello, Professor,” he said as he sat down in his now-usual chair. He had decided he wanted to try to chat with Snape a little before they got started; it seemed too strange to simply sit down without a

word and have Snape begin viewing memories. Harry had discovered that Snape seemed not to particularly welcome the conversation, but apparently tolerated it as something that made Harry more comfortable. “Professor McGonagall tells me that you’re having trouble with making the schedule.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “If those were her exact words, then she was mistaken.”

Harry thought back to last night. “Oh, yes, that’s not exactly right. She said you found it even more unpleasant than she did, and looked forward to shoving it into my lap in the future.”

“Yes, that is correct,” agreed Snape casually. “You are now nearly of age, so I see no reason why you should not adopt some serious responsibilities.”

Harry laughed, wondering if Snape was actually trying to make him laugh, or if it was just Snape’s extremely dry humor. “And you said your sense of humor wouldn’t be to most people’s taste,” he said. “I guess it’s the needs of my schedule that’s making it so annoying for you.”

“Again, correct. I actually attempted to persuade the headmistress to require you to perform the task this year, since you will need practice for the years ahead. Unfortunately, she denied my request.”

Harry chuckled to himself and shook his head. Amazing, he thought, how Snape would try to make me do that, even though I’m already doing what I’m doing for him. And to say it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He decided to respond in kind. “Well, don’t worry... I’ve had a wonderful summer so far, but the way my life goes, something’s bound to come along and mess it up. If it wasn’t this, it’ll be something else.”

Snape looked at him in annoyance. “It is deliberately, I assume, that you misunderstand my intent. It is not to ‘mess up your summer’ per se, but to have you do a job that should by all rights be yours to do. The job would not be mine were it not for the practical requirements of the situation; I did not seek it or welcome it. Having to do this sort of extremely tedious duty as well is adding insult to injury. I

assure you that had I a conscience, it would not be disturbed had my request been granted.”

Harry was surprised to hear Snape say that. “You don’t feel you have a conscience?”

Snape sighed in irritation. “As Miss Granger is fond of saying to you, Professor, *think*. I thought the headmaster explained this to you. The Dark Lord would not be well served by a servant who had a conscience. I did have one at one point, though it was, shall we say, underused. It now rests with the Severus Snape with whom you converse at night.”

That makes sense, Harry thought. “Yes, I suppose I should have seen that,” he agreed. “I guess Hermione’s right, thinking isn’t one of my strong points.”

Snape looked as if he were making a great effort to restrain a natural impulse. “Several dozen acerbic comments leap to mind, but I shall set them aside for the time being. Shall we begin?” Harry nodded and started focusing on love again as Snape cast Legilimens.

The sessions tended to last about an hour, and this one did as well. When Snape was finished, he said, “This is rather a different experience than it was with the headmaster. With him, I was almost always viewing events from some time ago, with which I had no connection. In this situation, I find blanks are being consistently filled in. For example, I knew boomslang skin had been stolen from my stores—though I thought you, not Miss Granger, were the culprit—but I did not know why. It would never have occurred to me that a second year could have managed to make Polyjuice Potion. Yet, ironically, all that effort and skill were used to a foolish end; Draco Malfoy was no more logical a suspect as the Heir of Slytherin than any other Slytherin student. Only your antagonism toward him caused you to suspect him, and you wasted a great deal of effort in pursuing a dead end.”

“Well, we were twelve years old,” Harry pointed out. “I’m sure we would do better now.”

“If we are fortunate, the only mystery to be solved this year will be that of how to defeat the Dark Lord. And sad to say, ‘thinking’ deficit or no, I suspect that responsibility will be yours, and yours alone.” Snape looked quite displeased at the prospect.

“Maybe,” replied Harry, “but I have a feeling that when that happens, it’s not going to be from thinking. It’ll probably just come to me, like that spell did last September. I don’t know why I feel that way, I just do.”

“I find that would not surprise me at all,” agreed Snape. “In any case, I shall detain you no longer, Professor.” Harry nodded and left Snape’s office.

Fawkes deposited Harry in the Burrow’s living room; Harry thanked Fawkes, who disappeared again. Hermione and Ginny were on the sofa. “Well, this time I can ask, how did it go?” asked Hermione.

“About as usual,” Harry answered. “He’s up to the end of the second year now. And while he didn’t say it quite the same way as McGonagall did, he was also impressed that you managed to make Polyjuice Potion at that age.”

Hermione’s eyebrows went up a little. “I suppose that’s as close to a compliment as I’ll ever get from him.”

“How does he view the memories, Harry?” wondered Ginny. “I thought you said that they came as kind of flashes of a scene. How can he see them long enough to get any information?”

“I asked him about that in the second session,” answered Harry. “Apparently it’s a skill you can refine and develop; it’s like, you see a memory and you kind of grab it and hang onto it. Obviously, he’s had tons of practice, so it’s second nature to him by now. I could probably develop the skill if I wanted to, but it’s really not going to be that useful most of the time. The other person has to be willing to let you view the memory, obviously.”

“You could try it when we practice, you know,” offered Hermione. “I wouldn’t mind. In fact, we should practice this afternoon, we haven’t for a few days.”

“Yes, I suppose we should,” he agreed. Looking at Ginny, he added, “I guess I’ve let some other things distract me.”

Ginny and Hermione smiled. “You’re enjoying your summer for a change, nobody’s going to blame you for that,” said Hermione.

Ginny stood and walked up to him. “I’d be happy to distract you some more,” she said with a familiar gleam in her eyes. As she kissed him, there was a small explosion in the fireplace, and Molly walked out, carrying a shopping bag.

“Hello, everyone,” she said as she walked past them to the kitchen. “Don’t mind me, you two, just go on ahead.” Harry and Ginny exchanged a smile and another kiss before sitting back down.”

“Very nice that she doesn’t mind that,” commented Ginny. “In fact, Hermione, it’s nice that you don’t mind, either. I know we can get kind of obnoxious at times. Okay, maybe just me, Harry doesn’t usually do that if there are other people around.”

“Well, he’s had a hard life, he deserves it,” said Hermione; Harry wasn’t sure whether she was joking or not. “Actually, sometimes I kind of wish I was more like you, more... forward, I guess. I mean, I am a little bit; Neville and I never would have gotten started if I hadn’t been, and I’m still more forward than him. Come to think of it, if I was with him like you are with Harry, he might be intimidated, so maybe it’s just as well. Harry might not do it himself, but he isn’t embarrassed when you do it.”

“More like, very happy,” agreed Harry. “But I’d probably be embarrassed if it was in front of anyone outside our group.”

“Well, I wouldn’t do it then, of course,” said Ginny.

“Anyway,” continued Hermione, “it’s nice. I know everyone’s different, though.”

Ron and Pansy came into the room, just having come down the stairs. Harry looked at them, saying nothing but grinning broadly. “All right,” said Ron, pretending to be annoyed, “you can wipe that smile off your face.”

“I don’t see why I should,” Harry protested, deciding to annoy Ron further. “I’m really happy for you. C’mere, give me a hug.”

“Uh, no thanks,” said Ron, trying to give the impression of being disturbed by Harry’s offer. “You can hug Pansy if you want.”

Smiling, Pansy walked over and hugged him. “Thank you, Harry,” she said happily. “I’m glad you’re happy for us, anyway.”

“I really am,” he said quietly, letting her go.

She looked at him with appreciation. “I know.”

Hermione stood and faced Harry. “Do you want to get started on the Legilimency?” she asked.

“Yeah, okay,” he agreed. As they went upstairs to the girls’ room, he commented, “I’ll have to ask Pansy later on what happened, how they got together. I know Ron won’t want to tell me.”

“Well, I can tell you if you want,” she offered. “Pansy told Ginny and I all this last night. It happened yesterday, while you and Neville were with the Aurors. On days you’re with them, sometimes Ginny and I went out of our way to do things together, so Ron and Pansy could be alone if they wanted to.” They entered the room and sat on beds opposite each other. “I think it was just a matter of Ron getting up enough nerve to make things clear to Pansy. She felt like it was up to him, since she felt she’d made her feelings pretty clear. Molly was gone, Ginny and I were upstairs, and Ron and Pansy were downstairs, on the sofa. Somehow the topic of you and Ginny came up, and Pansy made some admiring comment about how you told Ginny you were in love with her. Ron said he didn’t think he could ever do that. Pansy asked him how he would do it, then. She told us later that at that point they just looked at each other, and it was as though they both knew that it was

finally going to happen, like it was in both their eyes. Anyway, he just said, ‘I suppose, like this,’ and leaned over and kissed her.”

Harry noticed that they were both smiling broadly. “That’s a nice story,” he said.

She nodded. “We were all excited when she told us. We were laughing, giggling, making jokes... mostly at Ron’s expense, of course, Ginny and I... it was like a girls’ slumber party, it was really nice.”

“Sounds like it,” agreed Harry. “Oh, before we get started, I wanted to ask you when we were going to start having you do Legilimency too.”

“Me?” asked Hermione, her face registering her surprise. “Since when was I going to do Legilimency too?”

“I don’t know, I guess I just assumed it,” said Harry. “I should practice being on the receiving end of this. I know I should be pretty good at Occlumency by now, but I want to practice in this kind of situation. What if Voldemort someday tries to start yanking my memories out, like the one of the prophecy, or my relationship with Professor Snape?”

“I thought you just said before that that couldn’t be done without the other person’s permission,” she pointed out.

“Sorry, I didn’t say it quite right. I meant that the person it’s being done to could always fight off the intruder, or at least try. But someone like Voldemort could probably overpower someone’s defenses.”

“Don’t you have to kind of know what you’re looking for?” she asked.

“Sort of,” he agreed, “but not always, exactly. For example, when I practice with you, I focus on bringing up feelings of love, or friendship, like that. But you can also try to bring up feelings of shame, or secrecy. Apparently, Voldemort’s really good at it; Albus told me he used it a lot when he started getting powerful, to subvert people. He’d get close to a politician, some person with an important position, and do that to them. A lot of people had secrets embarrassing enough that Voldemort could blackmail them with it, and they’d do what he wanted, get

him information, even if they didn't want to. In the rare event that they didn't have embarrassing secrets, he'd just kill them, or if he thought they might still be of use to him, do a Memory Charm on them. Anyway, he's very skilled at it. Whatever your darkest secret is, he'll find it pretty fast."

"Then when we had the confrontation with him, why didn't he... oh, that's right, he thought he'd be able to deal with us at his leisure."

Harry nodded. "He might not have tried it against me casually because he knew I'd gotten pretty good at Occlumency, and would want to get me defenseless and wandless before bothering to try. Now, fortunately, pulling out someone's secrets like that isn't something that's done a lot, because the other person knows that you've done it, and as I said, will probably try to fight you off. You can't just sneak up behind someone, do it, and they never know. So, most of the time it's not going to be an issue. But you can understand why I'd want to try to get as good at defending against this as possible. I suppose I also assumed that you'd want to learn Legilimency."

"I do, of course... but do you know enough to teach me?"

"I remember what Albus told me pretty well, so I can tell you... I figure between that and whatever books you can find on the subject, you can learn it just fine. Also, I can still ask him about some things if I want."

"That's true," she said. "It's easy for those of us who don't talk to him at night to forget that. But wouldn't it be better for you to practice this kind of defense against Professor Snape? He can give you much more of a challenge."

"Yes, but I can't do it with him nearly as often as with you. I know you, you'll get good pretty fast. I'm not worried that you won't be able to give me a challenge."

She smiled. "Well, now I have an incentive to get good at it, to justify your confidence. After we're done here, I'll go to Hogwarts and get a few books out of the library."

"How were you going to get there?" he asked.



“The Owl Office fireplace, of course. Why?”

He shook his head. “No, use Fawkes. You and I are both high-priority targets for Voldemort; neither of us should be out alone in public, undefended. Pansy, too. She’s not a target from a tactical point of view, but I consider her the same way.”

She nodded. “I suppose you’re right. I’m just not used to thinking of myself as a target, even though that’s the whole reason I’m here. This isn’t going to be a bother for Fawkes, us using him for transportation so often?”

“No, he’s made that pretty clear to me, in his own way. All he needs to know is that I see it as necessary. He really doesn’t mind.”

“Okay, then, there should be some more time before dinner after we’re done, enough for me to take Fawkes to the library and back, and get a few books. I can start reading them tonight. Want to get started?”

They practiced for an hour, after which Hermione went to the library, and Harry went downstairs to relax and talk with Ginny, Ron, and Pansy. After talking for a while, at Ginny’s suggestion, all four went outside to watch the sunset.

## CHAPTER 2

### TEDDY AND ANNA

Three days later, Harry stood with Arthur and Ginny in the living room, waiting for their dinner guests to appear in the fireplace. John was first, coming a minute before six, followed by Dentus a few minutes later. Introductions were made, and the five stood and chatted until dinner was ready; at the table, Dentus was introduced to Harry's friends. John already knew everyone else, though he had never formally met Molly, Ron, Neville, or Pansy.

The conversation started out on Muggle-related topics, the main participants being Arthur and John. Watching them talk, it was clear to Harry that they could talk for hours on the topic. John talked for some time about current events in the Muggle world, and in a passing reference, found that he had to explain to almost everyone present what the Internet was, as only Hermione was very familiar with it. Harry had heard the word mentioned at the Dursleys', but he had never been allowed near Dudley's computer, and had no particular interest in it in any case.

"Well, thanks for that explanation, John," said Arthur. "I had a general sense of what it was, but now I feel like I really understand it. Most people I talk to haven't mentioned it, but a few are pretty concerned. Archibald, I don't suppose that this has been any kind of concern at high levels?"

Dentus shook his head. "Not that I've heard. Of course, as you know only too well, the top leadership tends to dismiss anything to do with the Muggle world unless it's of vital, immediate importance, like when they tried to get the Muggles to help them find Sirius Black a few years ago. But, no, I've heard nothing. I'd bet

dozens of Galleons that nobody high up in the leadership has even heard of the Internet, never mind understand what it is, and why it could be a problem.”

“Why could it be a problem?” asked Ginny.

“It’s not a real problem, not now,” explained John, “but it has the potential to be a big problem as time goes by; one that could sneak up on us and then suddenly explode, and threaten the secrecy of the wizarding world. Of course, wizards have always tended to use Memory Charms to keep knowledge of the wizarding world away from Muggles. Obviously, as we all know, there have been times throughout history where that wasn’t done as well as it should have been, and so you have this mythology in the Muggle world about witches and wizards—well, what they think is mythology, anyway—in which they get some things right, like that wizards ride on brooms and do spells, but they get a lot of things wrong.

“Now, there’s never really been a danger of a large-scale exposure of the wizarding world to Muggles... until now. Books have protections in case they fall into Muggle hands, but the Internet doesn’t. If enough information gets put there, it could get out to the Muggle population at some point.”

“But would Muggles believe it anyway?” asked Arthur. “My experience with Muggles is that most believe magic is a load of rubbish, or tricks designed to amuse children.”

“Most wouldn’t,” agreed John. “The danger is in the long term. What’s happening right now is that some of the few witches and wizards who are interested in the Muggle world, or who have one foot in it, are talking about wizarding affairs on the Internet. It’s no more than a few dozen, and they’re all connected. In what seems to me to be a weak attempt to preserve wizarding secrecy, they portray it all as if it were fiction, a make-believe world. This is not unheard-of, of course; in the Muggle world, people do form groups based around fictional or ancient historical ideas, and participate and interact as though it were real. Most Muggles think it’s peculiar but harmless, and shrug and ignore it. They will with this, too; no Muggle will read this and think it’s real. But what if this

continues for some time? More wizards might start doing it; it could start to become popular with Muggles. They could join in, thinking it was fiction, or just read it and enjoy it as fiction. But then the danger is, if something happened, some significant event that affected the Muggle world... normally the Muggle governments would give some false cover story, and people would believe it, or maybe it would end up some unsolved mystery that no one could prove. But if there was corroborating evidence on the Internet, or if wizards talked about it on the Internet and enough Muggles saw it, it could start to cast an uncomfortable light onto the wizarding world. And, worse, the nature of the Internet is such that the information would be almost impossible to erase or cover up. You can't do Memory Charms on people sitting at computers spread out all over the world."

There was silence for a moment as everyone digested what John had said. Then Hermione said, "Wow, I'd never really thought of it like that. I can see how that could happen. It still seems unlikely, but yes, I can see the danger. Do you think nobody at the Ministry would?"

Arthur shook his head. "Especially in the current climate, with Voldemort around, people would think it was trivial. I mean, even I didn't know about this. If I tried to tell anybody about this, their attitude would be, oh, that's Arthur, he's always on about something to do with Muggles, and they'd ignore it."

Dentus nodded. "No matter who it was who tried to explain it, nobody would sit still for five minutes to listen to the explanation that John just gave. They just can't be bothered with anything to do with Muggles."

John looked at Harry. "Oh, and Harry... I know this won't thrill you, but I did some searches a few days ago, and your name is mentioned in these pages every now and then. It's hardly surprising, since yours is definitely the most famous name in the wizarding world right now, maybe even more than Voldemort's. Anyway, a few pages have information about your history—not only about being the Boy Who Lived, but stuff you've done at Hogwarts, even up to what happened a few weeks

ago. They write about what was said publicly, and speculate about what really happened.”

“Great,” muttered Harry. “Just what I need, to be famous in the Muggle world.”

“Well, that’s nowhere near happening now, I was just talking about a long-term danger,” John reassured him. “Also, there’s a page whose focus is all six of you,” he added, as Harry saw the others react with surprise. “The page is titled, ‘The Potter Platoon,’ and has pictures of all of you, and short biographies.”

Now grinning, Harry surveyed his friends, who were looking at each other in mild alarm. “See, I warned you all about the danger of hanging around with me. Now, you can see it for yourselves.”

“I’m going to have to visit my home and use the computer, check this out,” said Hermione.

“You should know, you six are starting to get known as a unit,” said Dentus. “Of course you already are at Hogwarts, since you all spend time together, and everyone knows how close you are with each other. But it’s actually starting to come to Ministry attention, partly because of Harry’s importance, and partly because of the abilities you’re starting to manifest. For example, Hermione, I’m pretty sure most of the top leadership is now aware of you, now that you can do Harry’s spells, and faced Voldemort with bravery. And very recently, Ginny and Neville, now that they can also do the energy-of-love spells.”

“The Ministry leadership knows about that?” asked Neville, obviously surprised that the Aurors would have told them.

“The Aurors are responsible to the Ministry, Neville,” pointed out Arthur. “I’d think they’d have to have a pretty good reason for keeping something like that secret, and something that could be that important, they almost have to tell them.”

“Arthur’s right, of course,” affirmed Dentus. “Only you four can do this, which makes you of great interest to the leadership. I talked to my contacts more than usual yesterday, trying to find out anything interesting to tell you tonight. One

thing I discovered is that they're starting to take the idea of the energy of love far more seriously."

"You mean they weren't before?" asked Harry. "I didn't know that. How could they ignore it?"

Dentus shrugged lightly. "You have to remember, according to the scientific community, there's no such thing as the energy of love. A few people believed that what you said was factual, but most just thought you and Albus were exceptional, and you had a youthful and fanciful notion of the nature of what you had discovered, or that you just associated it with love mistakenly. They were more comfortable believing the scientific people. But now that they know that four of you can do it, they assume Harry taught it to the others, which he couldn't do unless he really knew what it was. Also, they don't ignore the fact that you four are two couples, obviously in love. That's making people rethink their attitudes. One even said—excuse me, Ron and Pansy—'You notice that the two not together can't do it, that's got to mean something.'"

Molly smiled at Ron. "Well, they'll probably be able to soon, then."

"Mum," moaned Ron. "What are you going to do, call the Prophet and tell them? Oh, no, wait, you probably already have."

"You really do take this business of not wanting people to know about your personal life a bit too far," admonished his mother. "Goodness only knows when I would have found out if you were the only one who could have told me. A week before the wedding, probably."

"Yes, and the use of words like 'wedding' is part of the reason for that," Ron retorted, to smiles from his friends.

"Don't worry, Ron, I know we've only been together for a day," an amused Pansy assured him. "I don't have those kinds of expectations."

"It's her expectations I'm worried about, not yours," replied Ron.

"Well, pardon me for taking an interest in my son's life," said Molly, acting wounded by Ron's attitude.

“This topic reminds me, we haven’t had a session for a week,” said Harry. “How about tomorrow after dinner, would that be okay with everyone?”

The others nodded, except Neville. “I’ll have to check, but I’m sure tomorrow night or Sunday night will be okay.”

“On this topic,” said Dentus, “there’s something I should tell all four of you, and Ron and Pansy should be aware of it in case they learn to use the spells too... I’ve only been told this by one person, so it’s not confirmed, but the person is someone I trust. Apparently, Fudge has been getting nervous lately about his personal security, he thinks that as Minister of Magic he’d be a pretty appealing target for Death Eaters. Which is true, and that’s hardly a secret; that he’s afraid of Voldemort and Death Eaters is an open secret at the Ministry.”

“Must be, since even I knew it,” said Arthur humorously.

“The new wrinkle,” continued Dentus, “is that Fudge is thinking of you four in terms of your potential to aid in his personal security. Not like as part of a detail, of course, since you’re all still at Hogwarts, but for special occasions, like where he’s in public, or around large numbers of wizards. One of you could be around, say, under an Invisibility Cloak, and could protect him from a Killing Curse should one come at him.”

Before any of Harry’s friends could react, Molly did. “Why, that...” Appearing to be struggling not to use impolite language, she calmed down enough to say, “That’s the most cowardly, despicable... you six have all put your lives at risk for this fight, and now Fudge, already well protected, wants to hide behind you? I thought my opinion of him couldn’t get any lower, but obviously I was wrong.”

Harry appreciated Molly’s concern on his and the others’ behalf, and he couldn’t help but agree that Fudge was not exactly behaving bravely. Still, he found that he wasn’t personally offended, and his already low opinion of Fudge prevented his being terribly surprised.

“I can very well understand your reaction, Molly,” said Dentus. “It may make you feel better to know that according to my contact, Kingsley reacted in

much the same way when he was told about the idea, except that the language he used was much coarser than yours. He was speaking to my contact, of course, not Fudge. Among other things, he said that he now regretted telling the Ministry that Neville and Ginny could do it. Adding to his anger, of course, was the fact that Aurors already protect Fudge, and the implication of this idea is that they can't be totally counted on."

"Do you think he will end up making such a request?" asked Arthur, obviously not especially surprised that Fudge would contemplate such a thing. "And would he make it through the Aurors, or to Harry and the others directly?"

"That's a good question, Arthur, I don't know," replied Dentus. "It would be highly insulting to the Aurors if he didn't go through them, but I'm not sure that would stop him. Even he can't be so slow-witted as not to know how this looks to them. If he thought he could get the agreement of Harry and the others, he might present it to the Aurors as a fait accompli, and try to placate them to the extent necessary. He may not even do it at all; it's just something he thought of and talked to a couple of people about. But I thought it was only fair that the six of you know."

"What do you all think?" asked Arthur, obviously curious. Harry was curious as well to know what the others thought.

"I'm not as angry as Molly," volunteered Pansy, "but I don't like it at all. I don't want them putting their lives at risk for anything but what they positively want to, not because they're asked to."

"I'm definitely with Pansy on this," agreed Ron. "You can't risk your life because you're asked to. You have to do it because it's what you think is right."

"Not Aurors, Ron," pointed out Neville. "That's part of their job, and I'm training with them. They want me to become one, and I want to as well. If I do, doing that very kind of thing will be my job."

"Yeah, but you're not one yet," pointed out Ron. "And Hermione and Ginny certainly aren't. They could be asked this as well."



“That’s true, and I’m not crazy about that,” agreed Neville. “And I definitely don’t want Harry doing this, even though he’s training too. Aside from his being my friend who I’m concerned about, he’s way too important to risk for something like that. It would be totally stupid.”

“Neville’s got a point, I hadn’t thought of it that way,” said Ron. “It would be like, in chess, putting the king at risk to protect a bishop. Does Fudge even know how important Harry is? Or does he just not care?”

Harry now wondered if Dentus knew about the prophecy; he was reasonably sure John didn’t. He watched as Dentus responded. “Albus did tell me, and I’m not surprised that you’re all aware of this, that there’s substantial reason to believe that Harry will play a prominent role in Voldemort’s downfall. Considering that, Neville’s point is a very good one; it would be foolish to put Harry at risk for this kind of purpose. As for whether Fudge knows this, I very much doubt it. Albus would have known Fudge either wouldn’t believe it or wouldn’t keep it to himself.”

Harry noticed that if Dentus knew about the prophecy, he avoided referring to it, no doubt because of John’s presence. Harry assumed that Dumbledore had either told Dentus the first part of the prophecy, or conveyed the essence. He decided to speak up. “Yes, but how much risk would I really be at? Especially if I had an Invisibility Cloak, or something like that, and can defend myself against the Killing Curse as well? What could they do?”

“Harry,” said Hermione quietly and somberly, “would you want Ginny doing this?”

He hadn’t expected that question. He looked across the table at Ginny, and knew the answer was obvious. “No,” he said, equally quietly.

The others looked on with sympathy as Hermione nodded. “And I don’t want Neville doing it, not for this kind of reason. Obviously, when we think about this, we’re going to have different standards for what we accept as risk for ourselves, and what we’re willing to have those we care about face. Harry knows this better than anyone, he spent a lot of last year struggling with it. It seems pretty clear that

none of us thinks this is important enough for those we care about to risk their lives for it. Fudge can resign if he's so worried about being killed. And as for what you said about Aurors, Neville, it would be a good point, except that you and Harry aren't even official Aurors-in-training. What they're doing with you is purely personal on their part, nothing to do with their official duties as Aurors. Some of them, like Dawlish, choose not to be a part of it, and you've said that they give up one of their days off every week to do it. I think that means that whatever obligation you have, you have to the Aurors who've trained you, not to the Ministry."

After a few seconds' silence, Harry said, "As usual, it's very hard to argue with Hermione. I assume this means that we're pretty much agreed that this is not something we're going to do?" He looked at the others, who by their nods or expressions indicated that they agreed.

Dentus looked at them in turn. "I have to say, I find it touching that what persuades each of you is the danger the others would face."

"Like Hermione said," said Harry, "we went through this a lot last year."

"You had ample opportunity," agreed Dentus. "I have a feeling Fudge would find that hard to understand, he's never had to worry about anyone's life before. Of course, this means you'll have to tell him no to his face if he chooses to bypass the Aurors."

"I don't look forward to that especially," said Harry, "but I find that if I think about Ginny being in that position, I'm pretty sure I can do it."

"Of course," said Molly emphatically, "Ginny's not of age, and there are no circumstances under which Arthur and I would have allowed it. But I was trying not to say anything, because I knew you six had to reach your own conclusions."

"Four," Ron corrected Molly.

"No, she's right, Ron," countered Hermione. "You and Pansy could start being able to do this anytime, especially now, and then you'd be in the same

position. And this had to be a kind of group decision anyway.” Ron nodded his acknowledgment of her point.

“He may not end up asking you anyway,” pointed out Dentus, “or he might go through the Aurors, who would say no without even asking you, I’d bet. But it’s good that you’ve thought about it.”

“We wouldn’t have been able to, if not for you,” said Harry. “Thanks, we all appreciate it.”

Dentus shrugged. “If we had a leadership that I could be proud to be part of, it wouldn’t be necessary for you to be warned about that kind of thing at all.”

“Well, that would be too much to hope for,” said Molly. “Oh, have you two heard about Harry’s news from Hogwarts? He’s replacing McGonagall as Head of Gryffindor House.”

Dentus’s eyebrows rose. “My, my, yet another youngest-ever record. My impulse is to congratulate you, Harry, though I see from your expression that condolences would be more appropriate. You didn’t want the position?”

Harry wondered just how strongly his expression showed how he felt. “I might not have minded so much if it happened next year, if I decided to stay. But you know how busy I was last year, and it’s only going to be worse this year, now that I’m teaching the N.E.W.T. classes as well. I really don’t need anything extra to worry about.”

“Maybe,” said John, “but it shows that McGonagall has confidence in you.”

“No, it shows that there were no other former Gryffindors available who could do the job. She admitted that was the reason.”

“No, you’re wrong there,” said Hermione. “She put it that way so you’d accept it and not argue with her. But she’s right, it is a serious responsibility. Do you really think she’d give it to you if she thought you couldn’t handle it? She’d have done it herself even though it’s a conflict, or had John do it. She’d break tradition or risk a conflict of interest rather than make someone Head of House who was irresponsible or not worthy of the position. You know her, you must realize that.”

Harry was silent, thinking about what Hermione had said. “She’s right, Harry,” put in John. “I know Professor McGonagall well enough to know that.”

“Well, maybe I’ll go back and argue with her then, see if I can get her to have you do it,” replied Harry humorously. “If you say so, Hermione. I just still don’t get it, really. I just don’t think I’m the best person for this. I’m not the type who’s going to discipline people; I’m just as likely to say, ‘well, don’t do it again.’”

“Harry,” said Ron, “I’m going to be serious for a minute, so listen carefully.”

Before he could continue, Pansy cut in. “That’s my influence, I’m starting to work on him.”

“Good idea to get started early, Pansy, there’s a lot of work to be done,” put in Hermione.

Ron gave Hermione an annoyed look, then turned to Harry and continued. “See, this is what I get for trying to be serious. Anyway, you are good for the position, even if you’re not a disciplinarian. I doubt you’re going to expel anyone, no matter what they do. But remember when we flew the car to school, how Dumbledore made us feel, like we’d let him down? Especially the younger ones, you’ll make them feel like that, without even trying. We wouldn’t have felt so bad if we didn’t respect and like Dumbledore as much as we did. That’s how they feel about you. They won’t want to let you down.”

Harry had never thought of it that way. As he digested this, Hermione said, “Of course, he’s right, I hadn’t thought of that. I bet McGonagall understands that, and it’s part of her reason for giving you the position. Also, I’m sure she wants you to have some experience in a very responsible position, for the future, if you stay on.”

Harry felt he should explain what Hermione meant. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t repeat this to anyone,” he said, looking at Dentus and John, “but Professor McGonagall told me that Albus wanted me to become the headmaster after she retires.”

To Harry's surprise, Dentus and John chuckled. "I don't think that's much of a secret," explained Dentus. "It may not have been in the Prophet yet, but I know he has mentioned it to a few people, including myself. I think he was laying the groundwork for it, putting the idea in people's heads."

"All the teachers know that's what he had in mind," added John. "And before you ask, no, no one resents it or feels that you don't deserve it. It's not a question of seniority. It has a lot to do with what Ron was talking about."

Harry found himself wishing the topic of conversation would change. He glanced up at Ginny, and saw from her grin that she knew how he felt. "Well, I still don't know what I'm going to do," he said. "But if I stay, then you have to be a teacher," he added, to Hermione.

"I probably will," she said. "I was going to tell you all, I was at the library today, and I ran into Professor McGonagall. We talked for a while. She was telling me that usually the headmaster or headmistress doesn't teach, certainly not a full schedule. She said that she will teach Transfigurations this year, but she wants me to do it next year. She basically offered me the job. I said I'd think about it, but I'm sure I'll do it."

Everyone at the table smiled; Molly got up, walked over to Hermione, and kissed her on the cheek. She accepted congratulations, then Ron said, "Wow, Hermione a teacher, who would have ever imagined it?"

She gave him a wry smile. "Thank you, Ron. I know that's as close to 'congratulations' as I'm going to get from you."

Sitting next to Hermione, Ron stood and leaned over. "Congratulations, Hermione. I know you'll do great." Then, to Harry's great surprise, he too gave her a kiss on the cheek. He sat down to laughter, as people took in Hermione's stunned look. "Pansy told me to do it," smiled Ron, to more laughter.

"I did not," laughed Pansy, obviously pleased. "And if I had, I wouldn't have imagined that you'd actually do it. Now, that was a lot more surprising than her being Head Girl. I mean what you did, of course, not her being a teacher."

“Oh, you’re Head Girl?” asked John. “I hadn’t heard, but yes, I would have been stunned if it hadn’t been you. Head Boy was Ernie, right?”

Harry nodded. “Right. How about you, Archibald, were you a prefect, or Head Boy?”

“Both, I confess,” said Archibald. “Always was ambitious, rule-abiding, that sort of thing.”

“Which house were you in?” asked Harry.

“Slytherin, of course,” replied Dentus. “You are familiar with the 4-3-2-1 rule, aren’t you, Harry?”

Harry and Neville nodded. “Yes, the Aurors explained it to us,” said Harry. To his other friends, he continued, “It’s something they say about the Aurors and the Ministry. They say that the composition of Aurors by house works out roughly as 40% Gryffindor, 30% Hufflepuff, 20% Ravenclaw, and 10% Slytherin. And with the Ministry, it’s the exact opposite: 40% Slytherin, and so on. Apparently it’s very accurate, and has been for over a century.”

“Yes, it means the Sorting Hat does its job pretty well,” agreed Dentus.

“And the higher up in the Ministry you go, the more Slytherins you find.”

“What did you study at Hogwarts, Archibald?” asked Harry. “I mean, what did you get N.E.W.T.s in?”

Dentus raised his eyebrows. “The usual things for becoming a politician... History of Magic, Ancient Runes, Muggle Studies, Charms, and a few of the usual subjects. Why do you ask?”

Harry shrugged. “Just wondering.”

Dentus smiled. “Why, Harry, I think that’s the first time you’ve ever lied to me. You really should avoid it, or I could teach you, you could get better at it.”

The others chuckled at Harry’s expression as he asked, “Are you a—”

“No, I’m not a Legilimens. But you have to remember, I’ve spent my career in a profession in which I dealt with truly professional liars, people who lie all the time, and for whom being good at it is practically a prerequisite for advancement.

So, when you lie to me... I say this with affection, I'm sure you know, but you lie with all the subtlety and finesse of a four-year-old who denies having broken the vase which is lying in pieces at his feet."

Harry felt himself blushing as the others laughed yet again. "All right... I didn't want to just come out and say this, but now I suppose I have to. Professor Binns isn't coming back next year, and we need a new History of Magic teacher. I thought of you, that you would be good at it."

Dentus was obviously surprised. "Why would you think that? Being a politician doesn't necessarily involve the same skills as being a teacher."

"It's not because you were a politician, exactly," answered Harry. "It's because... you've been teaching me about politics for a few months now. I have absolutely no interest in it, as you know, but you make it interesting enough that I pay attention and learn it anyway. It seems to me that being able to teach someone something when they don't care whether they learn or not is very important in being a teacher."

"Is that from your perspective as a student, or a teacher?" John asked, amused.

"Both, but more as a student," said Harry. "I've always felt that I'm lucky, that I teach a class that's very directly useful to someone's life. Well, okay, maybe more to mine than most people's, but most students know that being able to defend yourself is very important."

"Well, Harry, I will say that I'm flattered," said Dentus. "I would never have thought of it. I may be a bit rusty on my history, but I suspect with some study, I could get up to speed. I have been enjoying my retirement, however, and would hate to give it up, even for a few years."

"But you would have remained a politician for a while, wouldn't you, if the thing with Voldemort hadn't happened?" pressed Harry.

Dentus appeared amused at Harry's enthusiasm. "You're pushing a little hard," he advised. "You want to back off, give me time to think about it."

“See, even now you’re being a teacher, telling me the best way to persuade someone of something,” Harry responded. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to push you. I’d just like to see it, and not just because I want to help Professor McGonagall find someone.”

“I know, and I appreciate it. It would be interesting, to teach you in an actual class.”

“Actually, I’m not taking History of Magic anymore,” Harry pointed out. “I failed the O.W.L., and had to cut back on my classes to be a teacher last year.”

“Ah, I see. Well, let’s make that a condition of doing this, then. If I end up doing this, then you have to take my class.”

“Archibald, I would really want to, but my schedule’s very tight as it is…” Harry trailed off, then thought again. He was very busy, but he really did want to have Dentus teaching there, and it was only two more hours a week. Harry made a decision. “All right. If you come as a teacher, I’ll take your class.”

Ginny raised her eyebrows. “Wow, you really do want him to come.” To Dentus, she said, “He really is busy. I should know, I’m the one who didn’t get to spend as much time with him as I would have liked in the last few months.”

“It would be nice to have a proper History of Magic lesson, though,” Harry mused. To Dentus’s puzzled expression, Harry explained how Professor Binns’ classes were regarded. “So, it would be a bit like it was for me last year, replacing Umbridge. You couldn’t possibly do worse.”

“It’s always nice to benefit from low expectations,” said Dentus wryly. “Oh, speaking of her… you may be interested to know that apparently, she’s beginning to peek her head out from behind the rock she’s been hiding under. Since returning from Hogwarts, she’s kept a very low profile, practically invisible, though she never resigned her position as an undersecretary. She lost a lot of whatever influence she had. Now she’s starting to talk to people again. I assume she’s trying to determine how much of the influence she had before she can get back. If I had to guess, I’d say that Albus’s death has emboldened her to come out of hiding.”



It had to happen sometime, Harry thought. Ron spoke up, asking, “Can she really come back now? After torturing Harry, and setting those dementors onto him? Is everyone at the Ministry going to just ignore that?”

“Unfortunately, Ron, now that the dementors aren’t under Ministry control, it would be very hard to prove that she did that, even though you heard her admit it,” said Dentus. “But it may be possible to do something... Harry, would you be willing, if interviewed by the Prophet, to give details of what she did that year?”

Harry shrugged. “Sure. What good would it do, though?”

“Well, obviously, you have a status now that you didn’t have two years ago,” explained Dentus. “What she did to you is going to look a lot worse to people now than it would have then, and anything you said would be believed now, while it wouldn’t have been then. It could be... made clear to her that now is not the best time for her to make a comeback, while if she waited until, say, after Voldemort is defeated, then the timing would be better for her.”

“Ah,” said an obviously satisfied Ron. “Blackmail.”

Dentus gave Ron a faint smile. “Politics, Ron. Worse things than that happen all the time. This is exactly the sort of thing that your father, to his great credit, wants no part of. I myself prefer to only do it in the service of what I consider to be a very good cause, and this strikes me as one.”

“I will say, Archibald,” said Arthur seriously, “I’ve heard what she did, and I have no qualms about this being done, moral or otherwise.”

Molly said nothing, but her expression made it clear that she agreed with her husband. John said, “I suspect you’d have no trouble getting a lot of quotes for the article from the Hogwarts teaching staff.”

Harry felt that he should give his explicit approval, since he understood it would be done on his behalf. “If this is something you can do, Archibald, I’d like you to do it. I can’t imagine that her coming back is going to do anybody any good.”

“I understand, Harry,” said Dentus. “I’ll look into it, let you know what happens.”

Three hours later, after Dentus and John had left and with Arthur and Molly upstairs, the six students were in the living room talking. Harry and Ginny sat at one end of the sofa, his arms around her as she sat as close to him as possible while still facing the others. Ron and Pansy were at the other end of the sofa, her leaning against him. Neville and Hermione sat in chairs, holding hands. Harry wondered if he and Ginny were being even less reserved about physical closeness in front of the others, since now that Ron and Pansy were together, no one had to feel left out.

“So, what did you all think of Dentus?” Harry asked the others.

“Pretty impressive,” answered Hermione. “I’d say you’re lucky to have him helping you. I can really see how he’d be a good teacher, I hope he accepts.”

“Me too, I’d even pay attention in History of Magic,” agreed Pansy.

“I liked how he called you on lying,” smiled Ron.

“Yeah, you would like that,” retorted Harry.

“You know he was just teasing you, Harry,” said Ginny, moving a hand off his arm and holding his right hand. “I think he knew why you did that. But yeah, I liked him too. And I’m glad he’s willing to do that thing with Umbridge.”

Ron made a noise of disgust. “When he mentioned her name, I almost said, ‘damn centaurs,’ but I didn’t want a lecture from Mum.”

“I’m not sure she’d have given you one, Ron,” said Ginny. “We told you some of what she said the night Percy was killed. She knows Umbridge tried to have Harry killed, and it’s not that different. She might have even been with you. I’m not sure.”

Hermione looked at Ron. “So, you wished the centaurs had killed her? You truly wish she were dead?”

Ron thought for a few seconds. “Yes, I do. In a way, it’s like you’re asking me whether I approve of people who kill people being executed by the government. She tried to have Harry killed, so should she die for that? I know Harry doesn’t agree with me. He didn’t let Sirius and Remus kill Pettigrew, and what he did was even worse than what Umbridge did. If I’d been in his position, I’d have let them do it.”

Harry thought back to that event, about how he’d felt. “You might be right, Ron, but I’m not sure you can really know something like that until you’re in the situation, when it’s your decision whether someone lives or dies. There’s a real... I don’t know how to say it, pressure, maybe... you know what I mean, you’ve been in dangerous situations. It’s similar, but different. It’s like, you really find out how you feel about something, and in my case, it was something different than what I thought it would be.”

Ron thought again. “I see what you mean, and maybe you’re right. All I know is that’s how I feel now, and I think I would in the situation. You wouldn’t, Hermione? You led her to the centaurs, after all. You must’ve known what could have happened.”

Hermione looked uncomfortable. “That’s not exactly something I’m proud of, Ron. I mean, I would do it again, to save Harry, but... it’s a bit like with Harry and Goyle in January. If Harry had another way, he would have done it, and so would I. She could easily have been killed. I can see why you say she deserves it; I can’t disagree. But I was glad that Dumbledore went in there and saved her. It took some of the load off my conscience.”

Ginny looked at Ron curiously. “Would you kill her, Ron? If you could, if you wouldn’t get caught, no one would know... would you?”

Ron looked almost disappointed at his own answer. “I’m not sure; I have a feeling I wouldn’t. But I should, if I want her dead; it’s almost like I just don’t have the nerve to do it myself.” Ron glanced at Pansy, and his face hardened. “But one

thing I do know... if I had a chance to kill Malfoy, I would.” Harry saw Pansy look up at him, her expression seemingly both grateful and concerned.

“I would too, Ron,” said Hermione. “I think we all would, if we could, because we all care about Pansy. We know that she’s in danger as long as he’s alive. But let me ask you... would it be because of what he might do in the future, or what he did in the past?”

Ron raised his eyebrows. “Does it matter?”

She spoke quietly. “There’s probably no right answer to that. I think it does, anyway.”

“Then I guess I couldn’t answer right away,” he said. “I just know that the threat to Pansy is what makes me so certain.” He held her a little more tightly as he spoke.

Harry didn’t think he could kill anybody even if he wanted to. He was sure that using the energy of love would prevent him from doing so, but he could understand how Ron felt, as was sure the others could as well. He wondered how he would feel if someone had made the same vicious threats to Ginny as Malfoy had made to Pansy.

He was still thinking about it when he went to bed that night, and he asked Fawkes to sing after he did his Occlumency exercises. He wondered whether Ron might find it as helpful as he would.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry groggily looked up at the alarm clock, which read 7:08. It was set at 7:30 to prevent them from oversleeping, especially on days Harry was with the Aurors, but they had not yet slept long enough to need it. He looked over at the sleeping Ron and decided to have some fun. He got up and nudged Ron, saying, “Wake up, Ron, hurry up. We’ve got that big Transfigurations exam today, remember.”

Ron's eyes shot open. "Oh, bloody hell, I—" He took in his surroundings, and Harry's smiling face. He exhaled, lay back, and gave Harry a look of great annoyance, though Harry was sure it was mostly annoyance at himself for being taken in. "Harry, have I ever told you how incredibly funny you are?"

"No, you haven't," replied Harry, playing along even though he knew where Ron was headed.

"And it turns out there's an excellent reason for that," Ron said, following up as Harry had expected. As they changed from their pajamas into their regular clothes, Ron asked, "So, Dumbledore talk to you last night?"

Ron had asked this most every morning since they had returned to the Burrow. Sometimes Harry answered seriously, and sometimes he made a joke; he assumed Ron had started asking regularly as a running joke, or to see what kind of answer Harry came up with. Today Harry said, "Yes, we talked about sex."

Harry got his reward, which was a split-second look of surprise, followed by Ron's attempt to look casual, as though he hadn't been fooled at all. "If you don't want to tell me what he said, just say so."

Harry chuckled. "Wouldn't surprise me if he did, actually. If he doesn't, it's because he doesn't have anything to say about it, or because he knows I'll be embarrassed. Well, no, he wouldn't care that I was embarrassed." They finished dressing, but Harry stayed in the room, not heading right downstairs as usual. "No, we talked about the stuff that was talked about at dinner last night."

"Ah, so it was kind of heavy, then. Do you want to wake up the girls, tell them too?"

Harry hesitated. "No, I might tell you differently than I'd tell them. Some of it had to do with you."

Standing in readiness to go downstairs, Ron sat on his bed and looked at Harry expectantly. "Well, go ahead."

Serious now, Harry said, "A lot of it had to do with what you said, about wishing Umbridge were dead."

Ron nodded slowly. “He thinks I shouldn’t wish that?”

Harry tilted his head. “Not that, exactly. He probably does think that, but he wouldn’t say you shouldn’t wish for it, because he’s not very judgmental, especially since he died. No, it’s more that he thinks you’re... he talked about it for a while, and it’s kind of hard to say simply and quickly. He says you’re kind of damaging yourself, like I temporarily damaged myself when I did the Cruciatus Curse on Lestrangle, only in your case it’s much longer and slower. And, he thinks, more dangerous, because you—not just you, but anyone who has similar feelings—don’t realize what you’re doing. While what I did was like touching a hot stove, he thinks what you’re doing is more like very slow poison. It won’t kill you, but it’ll hurt you.”

Ron looked puzzled. “But it’s not like I obsess over it, constantly thinking about how I’d love to see her dead. Also, it’s just thinking, not actually doing, like in your case. Sorry,” he added, not wanting to rub Harry’s nose in what he had done.

“I know what you mean,” agreed Harry. “I said the same thing to him, and he explained why he thinks this. I only sort of understand it, so I may not be able to say it to you very well, but I’ll try.

“The basic gist of it seems to be that thoughts are more powerful than we realize they are. We think they’re harmless, because except with magic, we think things or wish things and they don’t happen. Thoughts are one thing, reality is another. We can think one thing and do another, and we see what we did, not what we thought. He said the dangerous thing is that if we think something, it sort of creates a foundation for the idea that it might happen someday. It steers us in a certain direction. Like, if you’re on a diet and you always think about how much you want to eat something fattening, you’re more likely to do it eventually, but if you can manage not to think about it, you probably won’t do it. He said, thoughts lead to actions, and thoughts lead to words, which lead to actions. He also said, ‘The line between wishing someone dead and actually killing them is far thinner than most people would like to believe.’ He’s afraid that by having that wish, you’re doing something destructive to yourself and don’t realize it.”

Harry could see that Ron was disturbed by the idea, and that he took it seriously because it came from Dumbledore. “So he thinks that I should just change my mind, that I shouldn’t wish her dead anymore? I can just do that?”

Harry shook his head. “He’s not trying to tell you what you should or shouldn’t do. It’s more like, if you’re going to think this, or wish it, you should be aware of what you’re doing, of the danger. He said it was like a slow decay, so slow that most people don’t notice it. But with us, we six, it’s more dangerous, because we get put in situations where we could have to make important, life-or-death decisions with not much time to think. If we’ve primed ourselves to think in a certain way, it makes us more likely to act in that way, in the situation.”

“Is he afraid that I’m going to kill someone?” asked Ron, surprised.

“He didn’t say that, but it does kind of follow from what he said. Or, at least, you put yourself in danger of doing so, if you don’t do whatever you do with a lot of conscious thought. Bear in mind, a lot of this didn’t really sink in with me, either, so I’m not going to be able to say it nearly as well as he did. I do know that he meant that even if you don’t end up killing or hurting anyone, thinking that way still harms you.”

“So I assume he thinks the same thing about my being willing to kill Malfoy? Because I’m not changing my mind about that.”

“He said that’s not the same thing,” explained Harry, “because it’s very conscious. Having that desire does damage you, as would actually killing him, but you would do it to protect Pansy, you would cause yourself harm to keep her from harm. That’s a conscious decision, you know it would hurt you. What you think about Umbridge, you don’t know will hurt you. That was the main difference, according to him.”

“So,” wondered Ron, “this advice was mainly for me, not for you? You wouldn’t kill Malfoy if you could?”

Embarrassed, Harry said, “Well, I kind of hesitate to say what he said about me, because I’m afraid it’ll seem—”

“—like you think you’re better than I am,” Ron finished. “I promise I won’t think that, Harry. I would like to know.”

Reluctantly, Harry nodded. “The fact is, I couldn’t kill Malfoy if I wanted to. I accept the fact that using the energy of love won’t let me do it. In a way, it was a good thing that the thing with Lestrage happened, especially when it did. It was like being immunized, he said. Having the experience of doing it made me decide firmly not to do it again, and that helped me become able to use the energy of love. Also, he said Fawkes wouldn’t have chosen me if I could want a person dead. Phoenixes dislike anger and violence, they can’t deal with it. Remember after the department store attack, when we were in that room at the Ministry? Fawkes usually shows up if I’m having a hard time, to help me, but he didn’t then. It was because I was angry, angry at Albus, angry at the situation. He couldn’t be around me then; he showed up later at the Burrow when I had calmed down. Anyway, back to the main point, Albus said that when I threw myself into feeling love, during the Voldemort thing last September, that I made a mental shift that changed my whole life, I just didn’t know it then. He said I committed myself to a different way of thinking, that it was a positive example of the importance and power of thoughts. I focused on love so intensely, and for so long, that it changed who I was, in a way.”

“Hard to argue with that,” said Ron thoughtfully. “I guess I see what he means. Of course, I don’t have this huge incentive to change the way I think, like you did.”

“That’s true,” agreed Harry. “I don’t think he thinks you will, he just wanted you to be aware of it.”

“Well, I’ll certainly think about it, anyway. Be kind of hard not to. Well, what do you say we get on down to breakfast?” Harry nodded, and they headed out.

“Oh, and buck up, Harry, maybe he’ll talk to you about sex tomorrow.”

“If he does, I promise to tell you all about it, in detail,” Harry joked as they started down the stairs.

“Even if it’s about you?”



“Sorry, I meant to say, I promise not to tell you about it.”

“That’s what I thought you said.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Trailing behind Kingsley, Harry walked into the dining area of the Aurors’ training center four days later. Neville and a half-dozen Aurors were already there, waiting for the house-elves to bring lunch. “Well, he did it,” announced Kingsley. “Took his first bout from me dueling.” As Harry sat down, Kingsley playfully mussed his hair. “Ah, they grow up too quickly.”

“Especially him,” agreed Jack Temble, sitting next to Harry. “Congratulations, Harry. There’s more than one Auror who never takes a bout from him.”

“So, who won the pool?” asked Neville.

Tonks looked disappointed. “There wasn’t one, dammit. Somebody should have thought of that.”

“Well, we can’t have a pool for everything,” observed Jack.

“Seems that way sometimes,” said Neville.

Tonks grinned. “He’s just annoyed that we had one on how fast he’d learn to Apparate.”

“No, I’m annoyed because you felt you had to tell me how Harry did before I tried,” replied Neville, in the same spirit. In a slight imitation of Tonks’ voice, he went on, “Oh, and Harry did it on his first try, Neville. No pressure, though.”

Harry was too embarrassed to laugh, but the Aurors did. “Aurors have to be able to handle the pressure, Neville,” joked Kingsley.

“Probably she was just remembering it because she won the one on me,” said Harry to Neville.

“I won his, too,” said Tonks happily. “Picked twenty minutes, only a minute off.”

“Twenty minutes is very good, Neville,” said Kingsley, obviously impressed. “A lot of us didn’t do it that fast. You can’t go by Harry, he’s one of those people who screws up the average.” Neville had a small smile, but didn’t respond; Harry assumed he was just giving Tonks a hard time, but didn’t want to admit it.

“You must have had to do a lot of paperwork for this,” observed Harry. “Not only getting him permission early, but also an exception from the ARA.”

Kingsley shrugged. “Yeah, but it makes perfect sense, like it did with you when we did it then, just for a different reason. Being able to use your spells makes him a potentially important resource. We’ve done it for Hermione and Ginny, too, we were going to ask you to talk to them, see when they can make it in. We want to give them a half-day of Apparation training, pretty much what we just did with Neville.”

Harry’s first thought was that Ron would be very displeased that his younger sister would be able to learn to Apparate before him, but Harry thought it wasn’t the best thing to say to the Aurors. Instead, he said, “I’m sure they’ll be happy to. We’ll talk to them.”

“Good,” said Kingsley. Looking uncomfortable, he continued, “Look, there’s a promise we had to make, that we were pressured to make, in return for doing that. It was to relay a request from Fudge, a request that you should feel complete freedom to reject. He wants—”

“—us to use the spells to protect him,” Harry finished, then saw Kingsley looking more surprised than he’d ever seen him look. “Yeah, we heard about that. We decided we weren’t going to do it.”

“Good for you,” said Jack firmly. “Sniveling coward...”

Kingsley was looking from Harry to Neville, seemingly trying to work out how they had found out. “Boy, you’ve got some good contacts. Not many people knew about that. But yes, I’m glad you said no. If you’d said yes, I’d have tried to talk you out of it. I was really angry that they even made us promise to ask in return for making sure that Neville and the others could Apparate, which is a perfectly

legitimate request. Well, I'm glad that now I can tell them I asked, you said no, and that's that. But I won't tell them that you knew already, I'll let them think you thought it over."

Harry wasn't sure he cared whether Kingsley let them think that or not, but he knew it was probably better to do so. "Did you have anything in particular in mind with Ginny and Hermione, after teaching them to Apparate?"

"Nothing specific, no," replied Kingsley. "Just that their abilities make them potentially valuable, and for better causes than protecting politicians. I don't want to have a situation where their help could be very useful, but the ARA hinders them from traveling. Oh, and Harry, you almost don't need this because you have Fawkes, but we arranged this for both you and Neville. You both have the same exemption from the ARA that Aurors have. As we already explained to Neville, we can't Apparate casually, but we can in the course of our duties as Aurors, though we try to avoid it if we can. You two will have the same status. You may not be Aurors, but there may be times when you'll need to Apparate as if you were, so now you can. You don't have to justify it to the Ministry, just to us."

"I understand, thanks," said Harry. "Although I'm not sure what situation—"

He was interrupted by a very loud alarm that seemed to be coming from not only the room they were in, but every adjacent room as well. Startled, he saw the Aurors leap to their feet and Disapparate; all were gone in less than a second. He looked at Neville, now the only other person in the room. "What the hell... do you know what just happened?" He had to shout for Neville to hear him above the alarms.

"It's their pendants, someone's—" Neville cut himself off as the alarms suddenly ceased, and he was shouting in the silence. Changing to a normal tone, he continued. "You remember how our pendants have that adrenaline alarm? Well, theirs do too, of course. One of theirs just went off."

Harry felt his heart sink, as he understood that at least one Auror was in mortal danger. "Fawkes!" he shouted, and Fawkes appeared. "Can you take me to

wherever that happened?” Fawkes settled onto the table in front of them as Harry tried to clear his mind so he could understand whatever Fawkes might want to communicate to him. He immediately knew the answer, though, because if Fawkes could take him, he would be in the air, tail feathers sticking out. Harry listened anyway. Neville stayed quiet, knowing what Harry was doing.

Half a minute later Harry exhaled, frustrated. “He can’t,” he said to Neville. “I should have known he couldn’t, but I had to be sure. He was just letting me know that I’m really the only person whose location he can simply know. He also let me know that the closer I am to a person—emotionally closer, not physically closer—the more easily he can know where they are, even if I don’t, but it’s not instant. He has to focus, it’s harder. It’s as if where I am is a bright beacon, because we’re bonded, and the people I’m close to are very faint, but visible, because of their connection to me. Probably you and the others are the only ones he could do that with. Well, maybe Molly and Arthur, too.”

“So, obviously, if you knew where it was, he could take you,” Neville clarified.

Harry nodded. “Damn, I wonder what happened.”

“I think we have to assume there was another Death Eater attack,” Neville speculated. “Maybe a few went out to the scene and ran into some trouble, maybe there were more lying in wait, or something.”

“I wish we could do something besides just sit here,” said Harry impatiently. “But I guess we can’t, we just have to wait for someone to come back and tell us what happened.” Neither said anything for a few minutes. Then Harry said, “They couldn’t just Apparate out to the scene, right? They had to find out where it was first.”

“Yes, that’s right,” agreed Neville. “They had to go to the place where all the Auror movements are tracked and Apparation is detected. So the ones here with us would have gone straight there, looked to see where it was, and then Apparated to the scene. I doubt they got there in time to do anything, though.”

Harry hoped Neville was wrong, but knew he was probably right. Another few minutes passed in silence, neither Harry nor Neville touching their half-eaten food.

Finally there were two simultaneous popping sounds, and Kingsley and Tonks appeared, both grim. “Teddy and Anna,” said Tonks, trying hard to control her emotions. “Both dead.”

Harry looked down for a moment as he absorbed the information. He had met Anna a few times, but hardly knew her. Teddy had participated in his training occasionally, and had always been friendly. But Harry knew that how he felt wasn’t a question of how well he knew them, but of how this affected the Aurors, of whom he felt a part even though he wasn’t officially one. I’d been having such a nice summer, Harry thought, that I’d forgotten that we’re in the middle of a war. The summer didn’t feel so nice anymore.

“What happened?” asked Neville, obviously very upset as well.

“It was an ambush,” said Kingsley quietly. “They were responding to a call, an unauthorized Apparation. It was only one Apparation, but when they got to the scene, there were at least eight Death Eaters there... and Voldemort. They all got away by taking Portkeys when we got there—most all of us went to the scene—but Voldemort stayed just long enough for us to get a glimpse of him, he wanted us to know that he had done it. The Dark Mark was up, of course. They set it all up, used a Portkey or whatever to get there, except for one—probably Voldemort—who Apparated there, so we’d send out two Aurors, as usual. They didn’t stand a chance, not against that many.”

Harry found himself imagining it, and felt rage toward the Death Eaters and Voldemort. Then he looked up at Fawkes and reflexively tried to get rid of the feeling or at least minimize it, as he knew how it affected Fawkes. He had an idea that had started forming even before he found out what had happened, and he wanted to know if it could be done. He looked at Kingsley and asked, “What happens the next time there’s a report of an unauthorized Apparation?”

Kingsley slowly nodded, understanding Harry's meaning. "We have to decide that. Right this second, probably twenty of us would go."

That made sense to Harry. Now, they would have to assume any unauthorized Apparation was a similar trap, and act accordingly. It would be a drain on their time and resources, which Harry assumed was part of the reason for it. "The next time there's a call," he said, "I want to go."

"Me, too," said Neville quickly.

Kingsley regarded them solemnly, obviously still very emotionally affected by the deaths. "So you can protect whoever goes."

Neville nodded. "And I think Hermione and Ginny will want to too, when they find out about this."

"They can't Apparate yet," pointed out Tonks.

"Then they should learn, as soon as possible," said Harry. He wasn't happy about the idea that Ginny would go into a combat situation, but he knew she would want to, and that he had to respect it. "In the meantime, if there's a call and I go to the scene, Fawkes can pick them up and take them there. They'd get there only a few seconds after I did."

Kingsley appeared torn. "I'm not thrilled at the idea of using sixteen-year-olds in combat situations."

Harry understood that Kingsley wasn't referring to their lack of experience, but rather that he didn't want them at risk. "Kingsley, we've all been in combat, in situations that make going out surrounded by Aurors look like a tea party. And it makes sense, you know it does. I know you weren't training Neville and I with the idea that you'd be using us this soon. But we really want to help, and it would be a waste not to let us. And remember one other thing—what Albus did to Voldemort, he thinks I did. If he's out with them the next time it happens, and he sees me, he may get scared and leave right away. There might not even be a fight."

Kingsley sighed. "You're right, it does make sense," he admitted. "But this isn't a decision I can make right now. I need a little time... I mean, this just happened."

Harry decided to press. "I know... but the next call could come any time."

Kingsley closed his eyes, then opened them. "All right. Provisionally—I could change my mind at any time—you're coming with us on the next call. Tonks, are you okay to coordinate with them, make sure they know exactly what to do?"

She nodded. "I could use something constructive to do. I'll show them what to do, and teach the girls to Apparate this afternoon if they want to do this. You go on ahead, I'll keep in touch."

Kingsley looked at Harry and Neville. "Thanks, both of you." He Disapparated.

"Okay," said Harry to Tonks, "I'll call Ginny on my hand, ask her and Hermione to come down here. Then—"

"No, Harry," interrupted Tonks. "You and Neville go there, talk to them there. I don't want them here when they find out about this, I don't want them feeling like they should have to do this. Tell them at the Burrow. You'll have to have Molly's approval for Ginny anyway. Whoever agrees can come back here, I'll tell you all the procedure for responding to a call, and I'll do Apparation training after that, if necessary."

"All right," agreed Harry. He lifted his left hand and looked into his palm, and spoke before Ginny had a chance to look back at him. "Ginny, get everyone who's there together in the living room." She nodded, and Harry put his hand down. "Let's go, Neville." They walked to the fireplace.

At five-thirty Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny exited the Burrow's fireplace one by one, as Ron and Pansy got up from the sofa. "Molly! They're back!" yelled Pansy.

Molly walked into the room from the kitchen, wearing an apron. “Good, I was wondering how long they were going to keep you. Well, I want to know what happened, of course, but I also want to wait for Arthur, it’s pointless to have to tell the story twice. Maybe you—” She stopped talking as the fireplace lit up again, and Arthur came through. “Oh, good, that helps,” she said, kissing her husband on the cheek.

“It was all over the building about the Aurors, of course,” said Arthur, addressing Harry and Neville. “I’m sorry. Did you know them well?”

“Teddy somewhat, and Anna hardly at all, but you know how it is with Aurors, that almost doesn’t matter that much,” replied Harry solemnly. “Neville and I may not be real Aurors, but they’ve made us feel like part of the group enough that this really affects us.”

“Which is the only reason...” Molly looked at her husband hesitantly, which Harry could barely recall her ever doing. “I did something I should have waited for your input to do, Arthur. But there was an urgency to it, the kids were so insistent... I gave our permission for Ginny to go out on calls with them. Harry and Neville persuaded Kingsley to take them next time, and Hermione and Ginny wanted to too.”

“They want to protect them,” nodded Arthur. “I thought about the possibility, of course. I assume you felt it was urgent because the next attack could have happened at any time?”

“Yes, Hermione and I spent the whole afternoon Apparating,” said Ginny. “I’d always looked forward to Apparating, thought it’d be fun, but now it isn’t, not in this situation.” Harry wondered if she was saying that in case Ron envied her, but a glance at Ron showed no signs that he did.

“So, now we’re all set on what to do if there’s another call,” explained Hermione. “Our pendants will let us know, and we immediately Apparate to the room where they detect Apparations, or take a fireplace if we’re here since we can’t Disapparate from here. Then we all go out to where it’s happening. For the first few



times, Aurors will take Ginny, Neville and I, just to be sure we end up where we're supposed to. Harry's practiced enough so that his aim is good enough, he can do it by himself."

"Do you think they're really going to do it again, so soon?" asked Arthur. "Wouldn't it be smarter for them to not do it again for a while, wait until the Aurors get tired of sending ten or twenty people every time there's a call?"

"They might do that," agreed Neville. "But the Aurors have to assume every unauthorized Apparation from this point on could be a trap. So there isn't much choice, really. It's either send lots of people every time, or let the Death Eaters Apparate at will again."

Harry, Ginny, Hermione, and Neville took turns relating the rest of the day's events, after which Molly returned to preparing dinner and Arthur went upstairs. Hermione said, "Oh, I just remembered something that happened this morning, I was going to tell you before all this happened. I got a fireplace call from Rita Skeeter."

This can't be good, thought Harry. "What did she want?"

"Apparently she was offered an interview with Fudge. She didn't say it exactly like this, but the Ministry wants her to do a favorable story about him. Basically, be as unfairly positive about him as she was negative about Harry and I in what she wrote in fourth year. She wanted to ask my permission to do it, though of course she didn't admit that was what she was doing. She was all snide as usual, and asked if I was going to make trouble for her if she did it. I decided that she's been on the sidelines for two years, and that's enough. I told her that as long as she doesn't write about us, and as long as she tells the truth, she can do what she wants."

"Bet she wasn't exactly grateful," guessed Harry.

"No, her first reaction was, 'with those kinds of restrictions, what can I really do?' She was just being sarcastic, of course, but there was obviously some truth to it as well. I told her to just consider it a challenge, then she said something

else snide and left the fireplace. I wondered if I did the right thing letting her write again, but I was worried that if I let it go on too long, she'd just get fed up and decide it was worth getting in trouble for being an unregistered Animagus so she could try to get me in trouble for blackmailing her."

"Actually, I kind of wondered about that," said Ron. "If that happened, could you get into any real trouble? If somehow she could prove it?"

"She can't, Ron," said Hermione with certainty. "It's all verbal, she can't prove a thing. Even if she put the memories into a Pensieve, it wouldn't help, since in legal proceedings memories are considered more as testimony than proof, because Pensieve memories can be wrong or faked. But even if she somehow could, it's debatable whether what I did was strictly illegal. It would be if I made her do something illegal, or give me money or a service of some kind. Since all I did was make her not do something, it probably wouldn't really be considered blackmail. So while I wasn't worried so much about legal trouble, I was starting to get concerned about how it would look, since I'm starting to become well known in the wizarding world after facing Voldemort. If she didn't mind suffering her own legal fate, she could make my life more miserable. I'm just hoping that now, she'll leave us alone."

"I don't know, Hermione," said Pansy. "I was there when you were talking to her, and she seemed kind of unbalanced." To the others' surprised looks, Pansy explained, "Not like she's a loony, though, I just mean that I think she really hates Hermione, the way she came across. If she thought she could hurt Hermione without getting into big trouble herself, I really think she would do it."

"Fortunately, she can't," said Hermione. "Being found out would end her career—the Prophet wouldn't employ her anymore—so she'll never risk it. I know she hates me, but I don't care. She picked a fight with me, and came out on the wrong end. Too bad for her."

Harry's first thought was of Marietta Edgecombe, who had also ended up on the wrong end of Hermione's wrath. He hoped that aggressive streak would

help them when turned against Voldemort and the Death Eaters, and he hoped it would be soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry bolted awake as he felt something like static electricity on his chest. It was his pendant, and that was the signal that would be sent out to all Aurors in the event of an unauthorized Apparation. Fawkes appeared; Harry quickly grabbed his tail, and found himself in the Apparation detection room. Fawkes then disappeared, Harry knew, to get Ginny and Hermione. A few Aurors Apparated in, although most were already there or had arrived faster. As Harry looked up at the maps showing where the Apparation had occurred, he saw Ginny and Hermione arrive. He didn't spare them a glance, as he was focused on zeroing in on the exact spot where the Apparation had occurred.

"Everyone got it? Let's go!" shouted Kingsley, and twenty Aurors and four teenagers Disapparated. Harry willed himself to the spot he had visualized, and he was suddenly in a field. There was no light except for moonlight, but his eyes adjusted quickly, as in anticipation of this problem the detection room's lights had been dimmed. He looked around, and saw no one but the Aurors.

"I saw him," shouted Cassandra, to make sure she was heard by everyone. "He was over by that tree. Wearing a hood, so I couldn't make out the face, and he disappeared less than a second after I saw him. Took a Portkey, I'm sure of it."

"Well, we thought this might happen," said Kingsley. "Okay, let's be sure. Look around, four groups, one of the kids with each one." Harry teamed up with five Aurors and followed them, ready to activate the Killing Curse shield at a second's notice, but they found nothing and no one. Kingsley called off the search after a few minutes, and they all Apparated back to the detection center.

Kingsley faced the others. "Okay, there were obviously two reasons for them doing that. One was reconnaissance; they wanted to know how many we

would send, and who. They probably wondered if we'd take the kids. The second was to annoy us, throw off our sleep schedules. We can probably expect more of this, tonight and future nights."

One of the Aurors spoke, a middle-aged man named Mark Tarman. "And we can expect this to continue until we catch one of them."

"That's right," confirmed Kingsley; from his and the others' expressions, Harry gathered that Tarman's comment had been rhetorical. "The problem with that, of course, is that while most of the time it'll be only one, we always have to assume that it could be a bunch, so we have to go at least ten at a time.

"They're trying to take back the benefit we got from the ARA, people," Kingsley continued, now sounding more like he was making a speech than conducting a briefing. "They're trying to get back the ability to Apparate, and make our lives difficult in the process. We've got a fight on our hands, and we've got to win it. We've got to work on our response times, get them even lower. I know, we all know, how hard it is to get out there fast enough to catch someone before they can take a Portkey away. That's our one advantage: they can Apparate to draw us there, but they can't get away by Apparating after that. They have to reach or Summon the Portkey and take it away before we can get there. If we get out there really fast, we could get lucky, and find someone who didn't Apparate as close to the Portkey as they intended. I'll be setting up schedules for drills, probably do that tonight while we wait for the next Apparation. As long as this lasts, there's going to be ten of us on ready status, and ten on standby, at all times. So, half of us will be night shift, and half, day. I'll put up the groups as soon as they're ready. We're going to get them, everyone. We can do it."

Aurors broke off into small groups or pairs and started talking among themselves. Hermione, Ginny, and Neville approached Harry. They exchanged glances, all understanding the seriousness of the situation. Ginny asked, "What did he mean by response times? Is it the time it takes to respond to an unauthorized Apparation?"

Harry and Neville nodded. “The Auror-level standard is two seconds,” Harry explained, “though I think most of them can do better than that. It’s not a matter of how fast you can get there, because that’s instantaneous, but how fast you can identify the location well enough to go there. It’s going to be harder for us than for them, both because they have much more experience Apparating and because they’ve done these drills many times.”

Kingsley had walked up to them as Harry finished speaking. “I think you’ll all do fine with more practice,” he assured them. “I wanted to let you know what I have in mind for you four. As you heard me say, there’ll be four shifts of ten, and I’d like each of you with one shift. Harry and Ginny, I’d like you on the midnight-to-noon shift, and Neville and Hermione, noon-to-midnight. For each twelve hours, six will be spent here on ready-to-go status, and six on standby, during which you could be relaxing, or doing response-time drills. And you should relax sometimes; this could last a while, and twelve hours a day is a lot. If any of you, at any time, needs some time off, let me know.” He looked around, and saw that no one was likely to take him up on the offer. “Okay, then. Neville, Hermione, go home and get some sleep, and come back tomorrow at noon. Harry, Ginny, you’ll stay here until noon. Whichever of you isn’t on ready status can join the drills, as soon as we get them set up.

“And, a couple of things... first, I know none of you has that much experience Apparating, and I don’t want you getting down on yourselves if you can’t manage two seconds anytime soon; Aurors are experts at this sort of thing, we have to be. Just do the best you can, treat it as a skill you’re trying to learn. What’s important is that you get out there in time to protect the others, which you will, even if it takes you an extra second. And second... thank you for doing this. You don’t have to, and we all appreciate it.” He made eye contact with each of them in turn, then walked off.

“It looks like we two won’t be seeing much of you two for a while,” said Hermione to Harry and Ginny. She and Neville said goodbye, and headed for the fireplace.

Harry looked around the large room, watching the scene. There were magically displayed maps of Britain, and maps of London and other major cities, on all the walls. Aurors were walking in and out of the room, or talking in groups of two or three; the sense of mission and determination was palpable. Harry found that he hoped he would be on standby rather than ready status at first, so he could start doing drills. He wanted to help the situation be resolved, and, he admitted to himself, to prove himself to the Aurors. They had spent a lot of time training him, and he wanted to help in a tangible way.

He and Ginny found two chairs together, and sat down to wait to find out who would be on ready status and who would do drills. They held hands, holding them low so as not to be too conspicuous. Harry looked at Ginny, and they exchanged support and love with only their eyes. “It’s not watching the sunset,” he said after a minute, “but at least we get to do it together.”

“I’d rather do this with you than watch the sunset, or do anything else, alone,” she replied. Harry nodded, once again feeling grateful to have her. They looked at the maps, and waited.

There were two more unauthorized Apparitions that night. The first had occurred at 2:02; the next two were at 4:04 and 6:06. After the third, in which no Death Eaters were sighted, it was widely assumed among the Aurors that the times were being chosen to taunt them. The Aurors were primed and ready at 8:08, but nothing happened, then or until the end of Harry and Ginny’s shift.

They came through the Burrow’s fireplace a few minutes after noon. Ron and Pansy were sitting on the sofa, arms around each other, when they stood after hearing the noise in the fireplace. “Bet you two are pretty tired,” said Ron sympathetically. “I heard you only got a couple hours’ sleep.”

“Yeah, doing these shifts, I might have to take up coffee,” said Harry with a small grin for Ron, reminding Ron of a joke he had made a few weeks before.

“Cool robes,” said Ron. “The Aurors gave you those, I assume?”

Harry nodded. “When we go out on a call, the Aurors don’t want us looking obviously different from them. They’re afraid it’ll make us better targets.”

“Hermione told us all about what happened,” added Pansy. “Did anything else happen after she and Neville left?”

They all walked into the kitchen, where Molly gave Harry and Ginny a hug and kiss each. They sat down, and Harry and Ginny took turns telling the story as they ate. “So, we got in a few hours each of response-time practice, but other than that, nothing much,” concluded Harry. “It’s funny... I usually see the Aurors when they’re not on duty, they’re pretty relaxed people. But right now, they’re deadly serious. For obvious reasons, of course. They may be busy, but nobody’s forgotten about Teddy and Anna.”

“I must say, I’ll be glad when this is over, and not just for the Aurors’ sake,” said Molly, looking like she wanted to adjust Harry’s hair or clothes, but refraining. “I don’t like you two doing this. I know why you are, don’t worry, I’m not starting that again, I just can’t help it.” Harry started to mentally dismiss Molly’s concerns, then had a sudden thought: he wondered how he would feel if he were a parent and a child of his wanted to do something like that. He then wondered if the fact that he was now with Ginny, and that they had ideas of having children in the future, had prompted the thought.

“I know, Mum,” said Ginny. “I will too. But you’d be doing this too if you were me.”

“I wish I could be,” said Ron, in what was obviously understatement. “And since you four are on different shifts, we can’t have any sessions until this is over.”

Harry tried not to smile, and wasn’t completely successful. “Well, nothing says there have to be six. You two could have your own energy-of-love sessions.”

Molly and Ginny stifled their giggles, as Pansy laughed out loud. Ron gave Harry a long-suffering look. “Oh, good, Harry. Very subtle.”

“I don’t think he was trying to be,” pointed out Pansy, now amused at Ron’s discomfort. She held his hand for a second, then ran the hand up his forearm. “It’s not a bad idea, really.”

Ron looked at Harry accusingly. “This is all your fault.”

“Really?” Harry asked, as if surprised. “I’m not the one touching your arm.”

“Thank goodness for that,” put in Ginny.

Ron ostentatiously changed the subject. “Well, I guess we’re going to have to be pretty quiet around here for a while. With you two on this shift, you’ll be sleeping most of the afternoon and evenings. Hope you aren’t light sleepers.”

“We’ll work something out,” said Molly. They chatted more and finished eating, then Molly asked Ron and Pansy to leave so she could talk privately to Ginny and Harry. They looked mildly surprised, but did so.

Molly faced Harry and Ginny, her expression serious. “This is about how you’re going to sleep. Ron had a point, which I’d already thought of as soon as Hermione told us what happened. The fact is, we could probably be quiet enough, but it would be a real effort, not to mention that Ron and Pansy would be shut out of their rooms all day. They could get by, but the bottom line is that given what you’re doing, your sleep is very important right now. Someone could make an accidental noise, wake you, and you might have a hard time getting back to sleep, and then you’d have a hard night with the Aurors. You’ll be in danger, and you have to be alert.

“So, I think the best solution is for the both of you, as long as this goes on, to sleep in Harry’s quarters at Hogwarts.” Ginny and Harry raised their eyebrows and glanced at each other, but had no other visible reaction. Molly remained serious as she continued, “You know I’m not trying to encourage you, and my daughter’s already made it clear that you need no encouragement. This has nothing to do with that. You need a place to sleep where you won’t be disturbed, and Hogwarts is



perfect. I've already called Professor McGonagall to explain the situation and what I had in mind. Now, there are other possibilities; for example, she asked me if I was sure I didn't want to have Harry in his quarters and Ginny in her Gryffindor dormitory, or a guest room. But you two can already do what you want, so there would be no point to that. And since you're committed, it would seem unfair to separate you like that just because Ginny's underage. You deserve to be treated like adults, given what you're doing."

Ginny's expression was as serious as her mother's. "Thanks, Mum. We appreciate it. Obviously, in other circumstances I'd be thinking all kinds of things, but right now I'm just thinking about sleep, and I'm sure Harry is too. It was really nice of you to do that for us." Harry nodded his agreement.

"Well, it just makes sense," said Molly, seemingly satisfied that they were taking the situation seriously. "You two can go on upstairs, get whatever you need from your rooms, and go ahead. I know you're tired."

They thanked her again, headed upstairs, and went to their respective rooms. They met in the hall, Fawkes appeared, and they were soon standing in the bedroom of Harry's Hogwarts quarters. Harry put down his bag and sat down on the double bed, then she sat next to him. "Funny," he said, "I imagined what it would be like the first time we got to sleep in the same bed, but it wasn't anything like this."

"I'm glad I wasn't the only one imagining what it would be like," she replied, smiling mischievously. "I've imagined it quite a bit, actually." Now Harry smiled in embarrassment as he wondered if she meant what he thought she meant. "But, yes, it was nothing like this, and we are tired, so that sort of thing will have to wait. Never thought I'd hear myself say that," she added, almost to herself.

She rolled over to the other side of the bed and lay down, and Harry lay next to her. After a minute of silence, Ginny said, "Suddenly, I'm very tired. I was going to change, but I don't think I'll bother. I feel like I could drop off whenever I wanted."

“Well, I have to do my Occlumency exercises, but I’m sure I won’t be far behind,” said Harry.

She rolled onto her side to face him. “I love you, Harry.”

“I love you, too,” he answered. She smiled, kissed him, then rolled onto her other side, facing away from him. A minute into his Occlumency exercises, he heard her breathing loudly, obviously asleep. Five minutes later, he was as well.

Harry slowly awakened, and the first thing he noticed was Ginny, still sleeping, lying on her side so that she faced him. In his hand he had watched her sleep more than once, but this was the first time he’d seen it face to face. He wanted to touch her, but was conscious of waking her up. He didn’t want to move, for the same reason, but he had to use the bathroom, so he reluctantly got up. When he came back, she was still asleep, but she stirred awake as he lay down on the bed again. She looked up at him and smiled. “What time is it?”

“Seven-thirty, so we slept almost seven hours,” he answered.

“Probably enough,” she said. She moved closer to him and put her arms around him. “Suddenly I don’t feel like going back to sleep, anyway.” He smiled and kissed her, then she kissed him, more aggressively. After they broke apart, she touched his face and said, “And now, I feel like getting into the water again.”

Harry grinned, remembering the swimming pool analogy he’d used the last time they were there. “Do you think the water will be okay?” he asked, wanting to know if she would feel comfortable doing anything, considering his memories could be viewed later by Snape.

“Only one way to find out,” she replied, and kissed him again. The kiss lasted for over a minute, and Harry found that his desire to keep going was beginning to outweigh his concern that what they did might be seen. They finally broke apart, and she smiled at him again. “You seem pretty enthusiastic.”

“I suppose I am,” he agreed.

“Well, that’s good, I like you that way,” she said teasingly. “I have to go to the bathroom, unfortunately, but I won’t be long.” She kissed him again, then got up.

He lay back on the bed, thoughts competing for attention in his head. He thought for the first time since waking up of the Aurors, of the challenge that they faced. He thought about Ginny, about how lucky he was to have her. He thought about Dumbledore, with whom he had not talked during his sleep for the first time since Dumbledore had died; Harry assumed that it was because in the current situation, he needed all the sleep he could get. He looked around the room, remembered that he was at Hogwarts, and wondered how he would teach a full schedule and study as well next term. Most of all, he wondered what would happen when Ginny returned. He recalled that in the most recent nighttime conversation he had with Dumbledore and the ‘other’ Snape, Snape had told him that his physical counterpart planned to avoid viewing sexual memories indefinitely while Harry adapted to the situation, and that the knowledge that he could do so if he chose was more important than actually doing so. Harry hadn’t had a chance to tell Ginny about the conversation, and decided to do so when she returned.

Ginny came out of the bathroom, and took a few steps toward the bed; he was sitting on the edge, waiting for her to sit next to him. She stood a few feet away, looking determined and a little nervous; Harry wondered if he was imagining it, as she was normally far less reserved about anything intimate than he was.

“Remember what you said about getting into the water a little bit at a time?” she asked. “Well, one thing you need to know about me is that I’m not a very patient person.” She moved her arms and shoulders, and the Aurors’ robes fell to the floor; Harry gaped in astonishment as he took in the fact that she was now wearing nothing. “I decided to jump in the deep end,” she said.

Harry just stared for a few seconds, so surprised that he was unable to do much else. Although still nervous, she was amused at his expression. “I’ve never seen you look quite like that before. I hope it’s because you like what you see.”

He knew that to say that he liked what he saw would be a vast understatement. He recovered from his shock enough to realize that she was nervous, and probably very uncomfortable. He stood and walked to her. “I love what I see. I’ve never seen anything more beautiful.”

She beamed and kissed him. “I think that’s the first time you’ve ever used that word to describe me. I think you just want to encourage me to do that more.”

“That would be good,” he agreed. “But I meant what I said.” Conscious of how exposed she was, he unbuttoned the top few buttons of his robe, lifted the front, and draped it over her as he moved closer. They were now both covered by his robe, their heads barely fitting through the top. He took his arms out of the robe’s sleeves and put his arms around her under the robe, and she put hers around him. They held each other for a few seconds, then he met her eyes and said, “I didn’t think I’d ever feel so proud, and so excited, both at the same time.” He realized that what she had done had had the effect she clearly hoped it would; he now didn’t care who saw what from his memories later. What inhibitions he had felt were gone.

“Well, I’m very glad about both of those, but right now, the second one especially,” she said happily.

He smiled. “Not only that, but... it’s like what people said about me last year, about saying Voldemort’s name. You inspire me to follow your example,” he said as he moved his arms under the robe to try to remove his shirt.

She stopped him, holding his arms in place. “Oh, no. No, this is my reward for doing what I did. I get to do this.”

Very pleased at her attitude, he stopped moving. As she started, he had a sudden thought. “I forgot to ask, did you ever go to St. Mungo’s?” The only answer he got was a smile.

## CHAPTER 3

### NO LONGER AT BAY

Harry and Ginny walked through the Aurors' fireplace at a quarter to midnight and walked through the compound to the Apparation detection area. They found Hermione in the large room adjacent to it, and sat down near her. "Hi there," she said. "I'm on standby, obviously, I just finished some drills. Did you two get enough sleep?"

"Yes, thanks," answered Ginny. "Mum had us sleep at Hogwarts so we wouldn't be disturbed."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "I actually thought of that, but I didn't want to suggest it to Molly. I'm glad she did it." She looked at them appraisingly for a few seconds, then broke out into a broad smile.

Harry felt his cheeks flush. "What?" he asked, more defensively than he intended.

"I don't think you really want me to answer that, Harry," said Hermione, still smiling. "You're practically glowing, both of you. I'm really pleased for you. And also impressed, since I know what you had to get past."

"That was mainly her doing," said Harry, looking at Ginny. "People say I'm brave, but she's every bit as brave as I am, more so in some ways."

Ginny shrugged. "I don't think of it as being brave, so much as... extremely lustful."

Embarrassed again, Harry said, "I'm just glad Molly didn't take one look at us and know."

“Are you kidding, Harry?” asked Ginny, surprised. “Of course she did. I think you were just avoiding eye contact with her. That probably told her as much as anything else. She gave me a few looks, I could tell she knew.”

“How was she about it?” asked Hermione.

“It wasn’t like she was pleased, but she wasn’t bothered either,” said Ginny. “The only reason she accepts the idea at all at my age is because it’s Harry. I think it was kind of like, ‘well, I knew they would.’”

“Did you eat at the Burrow, or at Hogwarts?”

“At Hogwarts, since we didn’t want to bother Mum so late, though we knew she wouldn’t have been bothered. But we thought, well, there’s all those house-elves at Hogwarts with nothing to do, so... it was funny, Harry summoned Dobby with his dog. When he got there, Dobby was practically wetting himself with pleasure at being summoned by someone as brave, noble, generous, awe-inspiring—”

“He had a few words for you, too, as I recall,” interrupted Harry, hoping to derail Ginny.

“Yes, apparently I’m quite a wonderful person in my own right,” acknowledged Ginny, “but I’m pretty sure that I’m just basking in Harry’s reflected glory. Also, I’m a Wheezy, and we had the Joining done, so with all that I must be pretty incredible. Anyway, Harry had him bring us some food, and within ten minutes there’s a table all nicely set up, a candle and everything, and enough food for five people. I was thinking, I could really get used to this.”

“Well, you could, if Harry ever asks Dobby to be his house-elf,” suggested Hermione. “Of course, adjusting to all that praise all the time would be a bit hard on Harry...”

“We’ll have plenty of time to think about it,” said Ginny, with an amused glance at Harry. “So, any more Apparations today?”

“Yes, two,” answered Hermione, turning serious. “One with me on ready, one with Neville. Both were the usual, someone taking a Portkey away. They almost got the one I went out for; Dawlish made it out there in just over a second, and just

barely missed whisking away the Portkey before the Death Eater could grab it after Summoning it. He was really mad, he was so close.”

“I can imagine,” said Harry, knowing how he would feel. “How’s your time coming along?”

“My best so far is two point two seconds, which I’m told is very good, for my level of experience. Neville managed two seconds once, so we’re both doing okay. I doubt either of us is going to be the one to catch anyone, though.”

“You never know,” said Harry encouragingly. “I’m hoping to get out there fast enough to catch one, anyway. I’m going to ask Kingsley if I can do a few hours of extra practice before tomorrow’s shift.”

“Don’t bother,” she advised him. “Neville already tried, and Kingsley said no. Gave Neville a little lecture about pacing himself, how there won’t be any off days, and so forth. And he’s right, of course.”

Harry had to admit to himself that it made sense. “Oh, well. Guess I’ll do the best I can in the time I have.” They heard the chime indicating it was time for the shift change, and headed into the detection room, passing and saying hello to Neville as they did. They looked at the list on the wall and saw that from midnight to three a.m. Harry would be on ready status and Ginny on standby, and it would switch every three hours until the end of their shift. Harry mentally prepared himself to Disapparate at a second’s notice, and started studying maps.

A little over an hour later the alarm sounded, and Harry instantly looked up at the large wall, on which three maps instantly appeared. The first was of Manchester, the city that was the site of the Apparation; the second, a more detailed and closer view of the area, and the third, a very close view of the target area. Each map had a rapidly blinking red dot indicating the exact spot of the Apparation. Harry took in the information as quickly as possible, and Disapparated.

Just as Harry Apparated he heard a loud thwack, followed instantly by a shriek. His eyes tracked a body flying through the air away from them, but what he quickly focused on was what had sent the body flying: a giant.

Harry felt a flash of fear that a dozen Death Eaters wouldn't have caused; there was something about the sheer physical impressiveness of a twenty-five-foot tall person that caused him to quail. He looked around, and the Aurors were reacting quickly, shooting off Stunning spells. He heard Kingsley say, 'Imperio,' and he wondered if it would work. He was trying to decide what spell to use when the giant shouted something Harry didn't understand, and wound up for another swipe of his hand. "Back off!" shouted Kingsley, and everyone including Harry Apparated thirty to fifty feet away, so as to be well out of range... or at least a few giant steps, Harry quickly calculated.

More Aurors started Apparating in; it had to be the standby shift, but Harry didn't see Ginny with them. "Everyone, together, now!" shouted Kingsley. "Avada Kedavra!" shouted twenty voices, startling Harry further. He watched the green bolts head for the giant, and hit him. The giant swayed, looking like he might topple. Despite being well out of range, Harry nonetheless prepared to Disapparate if necessary.

"Again!" shouted Kingsley, and they sent another twenty Killing Curses at the giant. He swayed again, and this time toppled over. Harry wondered if he was dead yet. Kingsley apparently was not wondering, as he had the Aurors fire yet again. Is that really necessary? wondered Harry, who then remembered that giants were somewhat resistant to magic. He recalled that four Aurors had not been able to take down Hagrid with Stunning spells, and Hagrid was only half-giant.

A few Aurors approached the prone giant. One stopped at the neck, checking the carotid artery for a pulse; another leaned across his face to put his hand in front of the giant's nose, checking for breathing. They walked over to Kingsley. "It's dead," one Auror reported.

Kingsley nodded. "Go to the Ministry, have them start waking people up. This has to be gone before sunrise." The Auror Disapparated. Kingsley addressed the Aurors, saying, "Tonks, Jack, Diana... go find the body, see what if anything we can learn from it, who it was."



Tonks and the others appeared far less than thrilled to be given the task. “If there’s anything recognizable, which I doubt,” muttered Tonks as they headed off.

“Everyone else, back to headquarters,” said Kingsley. They started Disapparating, and Harry did as well.

He had barely registered his new surroundings when Ginny ran up to him and hugged him. “Oh, Harry, thank goodness... they said there was a giant, and I shouldn’t go... I wanted to anyway, just to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m okay,” he assured her. “They killed him. Twenty Killing Curses, three times.”

Kingsley walked up to them as they separated. “Are you wondering, Harry, why I found it necessary to do that?”

Harry thought for a second, and realized that he had been, but understood quickly once he thought about it. “You’re responsible for everyone’s life here.”

Nodding solemnly, Kingsley said, “I had a feeling you’d understand that, given your experiences. You haven’t had to kill, but you’ve been responsible for others’ lives. Yes, that’s part of it. The other part, the part you might not understand so easily, is that it’s a message to the Death Eaters: that we’re not playing with kid gloves, that they take chances with their lives when they fight us. That doesn’t mean that we’ll kill indiscriminately, or if we don’t have to. But giants are tough, and not killing that one would have been taking a big chance, one I wasn’t willing to take. If there’s doubt as to whether it’s necessary, that’s the choice I’ll make.”

“I suppose I can understand that, too,” said Harry, wondering if he could make the same choice, to order a person or creature killed when there was some doubt as to whether it was absolutely necessary. “I assume Ginny wasn’t sent because her role is to protect from Killing Curses, and that wasn’t going to be an issue here?”

“Yes,” agreed Kingsley. “I didn’t specifically order that—there wasn’t time—but it was the right choice. We could all have easily been killed if that giant had done what he was supposed to do. I mean, it’s not hard to guess what happened.

The giant was told to whack us all away when we Apparated, but he jumped the gun—giants aren't all that swift, mentally—and did it to the Death Eater who Apparated to lure us there instead of us. If it had been done right, we wouldn't have had time to get out of the way, and most of us would have died. Basically, we were lucky. We don't know how many giants they have, but now they have one less." He walked away.

Harry and Ginny exchanged a look. He said, "Let me tell you... I've seen enough that not that much scares me anymore. But... that, that scared me." He mimed looking straight up, indicating without words what was necessary to see a giant.

"You may be Harry Potter, but you're still allowed to be scared," she said, taking his hand momentarily. She mouthed 'I love you,' which he did as well. He went back to looking at the wall and concentrating, and she to her drills.

The next two days passed without incident or progress. Death Eaters Apparated five to seven times a day, day or night, always to a Portkey which they took to get away. Harry's response times improved to the point where he was averaging one point five seconds per response, a tiny bit better than the Auror average. He had a close call in which he barely missed a capture, as did some Aurors, but they failed to catch anyone. The Aurors' sole solace was that they knew the Death Eaters were taking a lot of time to fly to the sites in advance to set up Portkeys, and so were devoting almost as much effort to the fight as the Aurors were. Harry wondered if either side would give up if the stalemate continued for any length of time, but he knew they faced one deadline: the start of the next Hogwarts term on the third of September. He and his friends had to return to Hogwarts, and would not be able to provide protection past that point.

He wondered, too, how long he and the others could continue to put in twelve-hour days. He didn't mind the time and effort it took, but he knew that the continuing stress of being ready to Disapparate at a second's notice for six hours a

day couldn't be sustained indefinitely. Kingsley had already approached them to suggest that they take turns taking a day off while another was on ready status for twelve hours instead of six. No one took him up on it, but he let them know that there would come a point when he insisted on it. Harry annoyed Kingsley by pointing out that he also hadn't had a day off since the crisis began; Kingsley responded by pointing out that he had been doing his job for longer than Harry had been alive, and so had excellent conditioning. Harry didn't argue further, but still had no intention of taking a day off.

At nine-thirty on Sunday night Snape signaled Harry to request a meeting, the first time he had done so for almost a week. Harry assumed that Snape had held off at first because of the Auror situation and its demands on Harry's time, but that Snape's needs could not be put off indefinitely. The session lasted an hour and a half, a little longer than usual, which Harry assumed was because it had been a longer time between meetings than usual.

Ginny had already gone back to the Burrow, and he joined her when he was finished, at a little after eleven. Fawkes brought Harry into the living room, as usual, but to Harry's surprise, everyone was in the room: Arthur, Molly, Ron, Ginny, and Pansy. He knew that Arthur and Molly might wonder where he was when he was having sessions with Snape, and that McGonagall had told Molly that Harry was at those times doing something important which couldn't be revealed.

Harry looked at them, a questioning expression on his face. Ginny gestured him to the spot on the sofa next to her. As he sat, Arthur spoke. "Something happened earlier today, Harry. Cornelius Fudge is dead, assassinated."

Stunned, Harry said nothing, processing the information. After a minute, he said, "By Death Eaters?"

Arthur nodded. "Almost certainly. The assassin Disapparated after he did it. Of course, this prompted the Aurors to Apparate to where the assassin went, but apparently he got to the Portkey before they could catch him. They think he was

using Polyjuice Potion, and that's how he was able to get close enough to do it. He impersonated a friend of Fudge's."

Molly voiced the thought now on Harry's mind. "As we've already told Ginny, Harry, the last thing you should be thinking right now is that if you'd only agreed to protect him, this might not have happened. He was protected, but obviously things can go wrong. You or Ginny being there wouldn't have totally protected him, just from Killing Curses; there are plenty of other ways to kill someone. If they were determined to kill him, they were going to get him."

"At least the next person to take the job is going to really understand the risks," commented Ron. "Oh, and Harry, there's an interesting twist to this, one that's not so good for us. When he was attacked, Fudge was doing that interview with Rita Skeeter. The assassin tried to kill her, too, but just as he fired the Killing Curse at her, she transformed into a beetle. It saved her life, but now she's out in the open as an unregistered Animagus."

"Which means," continued Ginny, "that Hermione could be in trouble. She has no more hold over Skeeter. I guess we're going to find out whether she was right about whether what she did was illegal or not." Harry assumed that the Weasleys had been filled in about what Hermione had done to Skeeter.

"I would never bet on Hermione being wrong," said Ron.

"True," agreed Ginny. "And nothing may happen, anyway."

"Something will happen," said Pansy, sounding very sure. "Remember what I said from when I saw her talk to Hermione in the fireplace. She hates Hermione. She's going to find some way to stick it to her. I'm sure of it."

"I don't know what she can do," argued Ginny. "She can accuse Hermione publicly, but between Hermione doing what she did against Voldemort and helping the Aurors now, she's going to have some good will to draw on. Nobody's going to be eager to harass her, except Skeeter."

"Oh, and Harry, Archibald called a few hours ago," said Arthur. "He wanted you to know that you should feel free to call him to talk to him about this; he

offered to come over if you wanted. He also said that you shouldn't think about blaming yourself."

Harry found that he wasn't sure what he thought. "Obviously it's hard not to think about it that way a bit," he said, partly thinking out loud. "But another way to look at it is that we're taking risks, bigger risks, for the Aurors—not so much because we like them more than Fudge, but because they're out there protecting people, enforcing the ARA, and sometimes getting killed, like Teddy and Anna. Fudge may have been a target, but it just seemed like he wasn't doing anything that made him worth protecting, or more worth it than anyone else. I'll accept the risk to Ginny in doing what we're doing, but I find I don't regret that I wasn't willing to risk her safety for his."

"I feel that way too, Harry, of course," agreed Molly. "That doesn't mean his death isn't a tragedy, even if he was a... well, anyway..." she trailed off uncomfortably, not wanting to speak ill of the dead.

"I guess, thinking about it, I don't especially blame myself," Harry concluded. Looking at Ron, he continued, "And you have a good point. He chose the position, and it's always going to have risks." He was comfortable with how he felt, but he couldn't help wondering how he would have felt, or what he would have done differently, if the Minister of Magic had been Dentus, or someone he had liked. Then he reminded himself that Dentus wouldn't have made the request of him, and probably would have refused the help if offered.

A half hour later, Harry and Ginny walked into the room where the standby Aurors relaxed and did response-time drills, and found Hermione sitting in a chair near the door.

She greeted them. "I suppose you've heard about Fudge, and Skeeter?"

"You worried?" asked Ginny.

Hermione shook her head dismissively. "She can't do anything to me. I have a feeling she'll try, but the worst she can do is try to drag my name through the

mud. And considering what her status is now—she’s going to be up on charges, the Aurors are sure of it—I don’t think anything she says will be taken so seriously. I’m much more worried about catching Death Eaters than I am about her, believe me.”

Harry found that he had no trouble believing it; he just hoped she was right. They talked until midnight, and passed Neville as he left the ready-status room. “Oh, Neville,” said Harry. “I forgot earlier to say Happy Birthday. Not much of a seventeenth birthday, was it?”

Neville shrugged. “Could be worse. Cassandra made sure everyone knew, so people were saying it all day, and they had a cake for me during my first standby shift. My birthday isn’t usually much anyway, and at least I got to be with people this way. I’m not complaining. Anyway, thanks.”

They continued in; Harry was on ready status, Ginny on standby. Harry yet again focused on and studied maps. Pretty soon I’ll have the whole map of Britain memorized street by street, he thought. He wondered how close to that the Aurors came, since they had to be ready to go anywhere.

A little over an hour into his shift, Harry looked up to see Kingsley rush into the room. He shouted into the standby room, “Ginny, get in here!” She ran in, looking at Harry quizzically; Harry’s face indicated his own puzzlement.

Kingsley was talking mainly to Harry and Ginny, though all the Aurors were listening. “Something’s happened to Neville and Hermione. They’re not wearing their pendants.” Harry knew that the Aurors would know this immediately, since the pendants were hooked into the same detection system that worked for the Aurors.

“Where are their pendants?” asked Harry, his insides suddenly churning with fear.

“At the Longbottom home,” Kingsley replied. “We’re about to go there, but we have to do it together, since it could be another trap. Everyone ready?”

As everyone nodded, Ginny whispered urgently, “You have to take me, Harry, I’ve never been there.” Harry moved behind her, put his hands on her shoulders, and Disapparated, as did the others.

The house was dark. Aurors immediately started using their wands as flashlights; one Auror found the lights and turned them on as others fanned out across the house. Harry knew the search wouldn't take long, as the house was small. Kingsley walked over to the table and wordlessly held up two pendants, one blue and one orange. Then they heard a noise from an adjoining room, and an Auror came out. "We found Mrs. Longbottom. She's dead."

Harry and Ginny exchanged a look of sorrow for Neville, and there was an explosion in the fireplace. Ron came charging out, followed by Pansy, both in their pajamas. "I called them on my pendant when we got here," said Ginny to Harry. To Kingsley, who looked at her disapprovingly, she added, "I knew they'd want to help."

"Of course we do," said Ron, with a defiant look at Kingsley. "They're our friends too. Any news?"

"Neville's grandmother is dead," said Kingsley, and Ron and Pansy had much the same expressions as he and Ginny had had. "We have no idea where Neville and Hermione are, and no way to find out. Their adrenaline alarms didn't go off, so they had to have been taken by surprise. The obvious guess is that the Death Eaters killed Mrs. Longbottom, one of them used Polyjuice Potion to assume her identity, and fooled both Neville and Hermione long enough to knock them unconscious. We have to start looking, but unfortunately even though it's only been a few minutes, they could be almost anywhere by now, if they carried them off on brooms or took a Portkey."

Harry's heart was racing, though he barely noticed it. "I can find out where they are," he said, as Fawkes materialized. "Fawkes can know, he'll take me to them. You go back to Auror headquarters, you can get my location from my pendant, and come in force."

Kingsley nodded. "You understand, Harry, that they could be in a nest of Death Eaters. There could be thirty or forty."

"I don't care if there's a thousand," said Harry, staring at Kingsley.

“I know, I just wanted to be sure you’re ready. Okay, we’ll only be a few seconds behind you.”

Fawkes stuck out his tail feathers, and as Harry reached for one, so did Ginny. “I’m going with you.”

“So are we,” said Ron, as he reached for part of Fawkes’ tail as well. Pansy put an arm around Harry’s shoulders, and he held onto her.

Fawkes, to Harry’s surprise, did not move. Harry looked at Fawkes, trying to rein in the urge to shout, so badly did he feel the need to get moving. Fawkes turned his head and regarded Harry, obviously trying to communicate. Harry took a deep breath, and tried to clear his mind so he could understand. “What’s going on?” asked Ron. “Why isn’t he going?”

After a few seconds, Harry answered. “He says, only me.” To the other’s surprised looks, Harry tried to explain. “He doesn’t know where they are, I think. He has to take me somewhere, it’ll make it easier to find them, I’m not sure why.” He looked at Kingsley. “Fawkes is going to take me somewhere, but not where they are. The next place he takes me, after that, will be the place. When you see me go there, send everybody.” Turning to his three friends, he said, “After Fawkes takes me to where they are, he’ll come right back here for you. Be ready.” They nodded, and let go of him and Fawkes. Fawkes took flight.

They appeared in Dumbledore’s quarters; Harry found himself standing in front of one of the chairs in which he and Dumbledore had sat last year. He looked up at Fawkes. “Is it something that’s here? Something he has? What am I supposed to do?” He felt nearly panicked, imagining what was being done to Neville and Hermione as he sat there.

Fawkes fluttered down to the arm of the other chair and started singing. Harry suddenly realized that what Fawkes wanted at the moment was for him to calm down, to feel peaceful, as that was the usual purpose of the song. He focused on calming himself down, tried to focus on love. In the urgency of the moment he found it very difficult, but as he did, he started to understand why Fawkes had



brought him there. He wasn't sure if he was realizing it himself or if Fawkes was telling him, but he knew. Fawkes could locate Neville and Hermione because they were close to Harry, but it required concentration, and was difficult. Fawkes could not find them at the moment because Harry's emotional state was interfering with Fawkes' ability to concentrate to the degree necessary. Harry understood that the faster he calmed down, the faster he would reach Neville and Hermione.

He took several deliberate deep breaths, and tried to sink into the feeling of love as intensely as he had done last September. Images of Neville and Hermione in distress came into his head, and he did his best to dismiss them. Focus on love, he thought. He calmed himself, focusing harder.

After what Harry thought was about two minutes, Fawkes flew into the air, his tail facing Harry. Still focusing on love, Harry grabbed the tail, and they were gone.

They materialized outside, in what looked like a rural area, though Harry spared no time to look at his surroundings. Neville was lying on the ground screaming, clearly being tortured. Hermione was frantic, then startled as she saw Harry and Fawkes. Wand already out, Harry instantly summoned his shield, and it surrounded Neville, who stopped screaming. Fawkes disappeared. Harry then summoned Hermione's wand, directing it toward her; she grabbed it and turned to face the Death Eaters. The Death Eaters started firing spells at Harry and Hermione, who focused on warding them off as Aurors started Apparating all around. Fawkes reappeared, carrying Ron, Pansy, and Ginny. He started singing as they let go of him and started firing on Death Eaters.

Taking a better look around now that he personally was no longer under dire threat, he saw that there were about twenty Death Eaters. Aurors continued to Apparate in; Harry realized that it must be all forty, that Kingsley had called in the ones who were off shift and had probably been sleeping. Seeing an opportunity, Harry looked for Voldemort. He found him, behind a group of Death Eaters. He

quickly put up an anti-Disapparation field, hoping it would work. We outnumber them, Harry thought, we could get Voldemort now, with Albus's help.

He saw the Killing Curse shield go up around one Auror, then another; he realized that Ginny and Hermione were focusing on the battle, casting the spell where needed. He saw Neville get up, and he Summoned Neville's wand over to him. Neville caught it, but didn't acknowledge Harry. He ran over to the battle, near where Bellatrix Lestrange was dueling with an Auror. As soon as he got close, Neville raised his wand and shouted, "Crucio!" Lestrange screamed, fell to the ground, and continued screaming. On Neville's face, Harry saw a look that he never would have imagined. He would have sworn that it was not really Neville, that something was controlling him.

The Death Eaters fell back into a circle as Lucius Malfoy cast what looked like a gold circle around them; all were contained within it except Lestrange, and two others who had fallen. Malfoy reached into his pocket, and in an instant, everyone in the gold circle was gone.

It was suddenly quiet, except for the sound of Lestrange screaming. "Neville, stop!" shouted Cassandra. Focusing on Lestrange, Neville ignored her. Harry briefly thought of putting up his shield around Lestrange, and realized he couldn't bring himself to do it, feeling that Neville, however irrationally, would see it as a betrayal.

Hermione ran over to Neville as Cassandra shook him. "Neville!" she screamed. Cassandra grabbed his wand arm and yanked it upwards; Lestrange stopped screaming. Neville turned on Cassandra furiously. "I wasn't finished!" he shouted in rage.

Hermione looked at him sadly. "You were never going to be finished, Neville," she said quietly. "You could do it for days—"

"Not days," Neville replied, still shouting, but a little less loudly than before. "Just an hour. Just an hour," he repeated. Harry looked at Ginny and Ron, and they

at him, with deep sadness, as they understood that Neville had been hoping to inflict the same fate on Lestrangle that she had on his parents.

Lestrangle was regaining her breath. “You should have let him continue,” she said scornfully. “He might get good at it someday. He’s not, now.”

Fury flared on Neville’s face again as Cassandra held onto Neville’s wand arm to restrain him. “Don’t tempt me,” she shouted at Lestrangle. Without a word, Kingsley raised his wand and shot off a Stunning spell. Lestrangle lay flat on the ground, unconscious.

“Well, we’d heard enough out of her, that’s for sure,” said Kingsley. “I assume they’re just unconscious?” he asked, gesturing to the other two Death Eaters on the ground. A nearby Auror nodded. “We all okay?” he asked, and got another nod. “Okay, everyone start heading back. Cassandra, you and Tonks help Neville.”

“Me too,” said Hermione, as Aurors started disappearing.

“Soon, Hermione,” Kingsley assured her, “but first we need to know what happened. Let’s go back to headquarters, and we’ll sit down and you can tell us. Then you can go be with Neville.” He picked up Lestrangle, and none too gently swung her over his shoulder.

She reluctantly nodded, as she put an arm around Neville. Having largely calmed down, Neville put his around her, and leaned over and whispered into her ear. She glanced at him, then nodded. “Okay, we’re ready,” she said.

“Fawkes’ll take you,” said Harry to Ron and Pansy. He prepared to Disapparate as everyone else started doing so, and saw Fawkes appear before Ron and Pansy just before he disappeared.

Harry and his friends formed a loose circle soon after their arrival at Auror headquarters. Hermione again put an arm around Neville, who saw Kingsley approach and asked, “How soon can I get back to it?”

Trying to avoid looking incredulous, Kingsley spoke solemnly. “Not for some time, Neville. I know you want to help. But Aurors have to be in control emotionally at all times. What you just went through, most people wouldn’t wish on their worst enemy. You need time to recover from it.”

“Come on, Neville,” said Cassandra gently. “Come with us.”

“But they need me! Me and the other three—”

“We’ll be all right, Neville,” said Harry, as encouragingly as he could. “We’ll get by. We can do eight-hour shifts with no standby, something like that. It’ll work.”

“He’s right, Neville,” said Kingsley. “Having one of you on standby is a luxury, not a necessity. What’s important now is you getting better, and that’s going to take time. Cassandra will help you, she’ll be there for you. We all will, we’ll all help you.”

Neville was staring straight ahead, as if still unable to grasp the idea that he couldn’t go back on duty right away. Cassandra said, “Let’s go, Neville. You’ll stay here tonight, there’s some nice guest rooms. We’ll help you get set up.” He finally nodded. With an arm around his shoulder and Tonks following, she led him away.

Kingsley walked to a meeting room, Harry and the others following. “Do you want to tell us, or show us in a Pensieve?”

“I’d rather just tell you, if that’s okay,” she said, and Kingsley nodded. Still emotional from her ordeal, she calmed herself and began her story. “I had just gotten into bed when Neville called me on my pendant. I got up and went to the bathroom because I didn’t want to disturb Pansy. He sounded... not agitated, but unusual. He said there was something important that his grandmother wanted to talk to us about, and that I should come right over. To tell you the truth, right then I felt like there was something wrong; I couldn’t say what, but it just didn’t feel right. It seemed strange. But it was nothing I could put my finger on, and he seemed to think it was important, so I put on some clothes and took the fireplace over.

“His grandmother, or what we thought was his grandmother, had us sit down at the table. She seemed to be acting strangely, too, but I just put it down to

the idea that she was going to tell us something important. We were sitting there, and she got up to get something. She was behind us, and that's the last thing I remember from there. She knocked us out, I don't know how.

"The next thing I knew, we were in the place where you found us. I assume it was Fawkes that found us?" Harry nodded. "Thank goodness for Fawkes," she said, shuddering. "If not for him..."

Harry didn't want to think about that. "Come to think of it, why didn't they think of that? Didn't they know enough about phoenixes to know that Fawkes could do that?"

"No, Harry, in fact, I was surprised myself. It says in *Reborn From the Ashes* that a phoenix can do that for someone's spouse, but it says nothing more than that. They had reason to think that as long as they didn't take Ginny, they wouldn't be found. So either Fawkes is unusual, or the bond you have with the rest of us is unusually strong." Harry knew which one he thought it was.

"Anyway, they woke us up. There were about twenty of them, and of course they had taken our wands. Voldemort said something about how good of us it was to join him, that kind of stupid thing, being sarcastic. Neville said, "You've made a big mistake, Voldemort. Aurors are going to be arriving any second now." Voldemort said, "Are they? Without your pendants? They must be very impressive Aurors indeed." Neville looked down and touched his neck; he hadn't realized our pendants were gone. Most of the Death Eaters laughed, and then Bellatrix Lestrange took a step toward him. She said, "Longbottom, you have been around Potter too long, you've picked up his bad habits. We do not say the Dark Lord's name. And if we do..." and then she did the Cruciatius Curse on him. It was horrible. I don't know for how long, maybe ten or fifteen seconds. It was all I could do not to plead with her to stop, I know that would've really entertained them. She stopped it, and Neville was gasping, trying to recover from being Cursed, you know how that is, right afterwards. She said, "Now, what do we call him?" And Neville—I

still can't believe he did this—looked up and said, 'Asshole.'" Hermione looked uncomfortable repeating the word.

Everyone else's eyes went wide, including Kingsley's. "Wow," said Ron, looking amazed, "that's very... un-Neville-like."

Hermione nodded. "I thought so, too, but I think I understood what he was thinking. They had already killed his grandmother, and the situation we were in... I thought we had no hope, that it was just a question of how much we were going to have to suffer before we died, or that we might end up like his parents. That thought scared me, but then I remembered where his parents really are," she glanced at Harry, "and I wasn't quite so scared. But I'm sure he thought the same thing, and I think for him it was like you see it with you and Voldemort, Harry. They were going to torture us no matter what, so I'm pretty sure he just decided, the hell with it, we're dead anyway, so I'm going to say what I want. I was really proud of him, even though I was practically hysterical, watching him suffer like that.

"Well, you can easily guess what happened next, of course. When they got over their shock at what Neville said, they did the Curse on him again, and let it go for a long time, I'd say about two minutes." Harry saw Pansy shudder. "I was trying so hard not to react, and probably doing a really bad job. They knew how it would affect me, and they were smiling while watching Neville scream. At one point I looked over at them, and I saw Malfoy with them. He just smiled and raised his eyebrows, like he was saying, 'remember me?' I was so furious..."

"Finally, they stopped. Voldemort said, 'Bella, where is your sense of fair play? Let's see what he can do with his wand.' She threw his wand to him. He picked it up, but could really only get to his knees, he was still weak from the Curse. Lestrangle said, 'Well, Longbottom, let's see... I drove your parents insane, killed your grandmother—the Dark Lord, kind as he is, allowed me the privilege—and now I can make it a clean sweep. But should you join your parents or your grandmother,

that's the question..." Hermione shook her head. "I'm sorry, this is hard to say all at once. That people can be so inhuman, so despicable..."

She paused for a minute, trying to hold back tears, then continued. "She said she heard Neville could do your new spells, and she wanted to see them for herself. Then she did the Curse again, and even though he had his wand, he couldn't bring up the shield, and it hit him. They all laughed, and somebody said, 'Potter should have given him more lessons.' She whisked his wand away, then Voldemort looked at me. He said, 'First, Mudblood, there is a little business to settle from last month, for your disrespect.' Then he did the Curse on me, I'm not sure for how long. Then he asked me what I had done that day, what my role was in what happened. I said I didn't remember, although I knew he would know I was lying. He said that Neville would suffer until I changed my mind. Neville yelled, 'Don't tell—' and he was interrupted by the Curse, but I knew what he wanted, of course. I knew it was like I said before—we were going to die, it was just a question of when and how. I had decided I wasn't going to tell them no matter what, but watching Neville, I was starting to weaken. Then I realized that Voldemort could take it from me using Legilimency anyway, and he was just doing it that way for entertainment, to see how long I'd watch Neville suffer before I broke down and told them. I was just opening my mouth to tell them when Harry and Fawkes appeared. I was so relieved, it was like one of those Muggle movies where the cavalry comes over the hill. Not even so much that I wouldn't have to tell them what I knew, of course, but so Neville wouldn't have to suffer anymore... it was so horrible."

Harry was suddenly aware of how much effort it had been for her to tell the story while keeping control of her emotions. She looked at Kingsley and said, "Is it all right if I go see Neville now?" He nodded, and she got up. Ron, sitting next to her, got up as well, and reached out to hug her. She fell into his arms and started to sob; he held her and tried not to do so himself. After a minute, she thanked Ron, and left.

Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Pansy all exchanged glances, all very emotionally affected by what their friends had suffered. Kingsley spoke, addressing the practicalities of the situation. “Obviously, Neville’s going to be out of action for a while. At least a few weeks, probably more. If an Auror went through what he did, they’d probably be off for a month.

“Unfortunately, much as we all care about Neville, we still have to keep dealing with this Apparation problem. Also, I don’t want to make any assumptions about Hermione’s status. She went through a lot, too, and might need some time, though if she says she can return soon I’ll be inclined to accept it. But we have to work out what to do in the meantime. Harry, you and Ginny may have to just do twelve-hour ready status shifts for the time being.” They nodded, indicating that it was no problem.

Ron spoke up. “The last time we were tested was three weeks ago,” he pointed out. “It’s not impossible that Pansy or I could have reached 100 by now and be able to do the spells. It’s worth checking.”

“I’m not thrilled at all with the idea of Pansy going out on calls,” interjected Harry. “I mean, the whole point of her being at the Burrow—”

“You think I like it, Harry?” Ron challenged him. “I don’t, I really don’t. But we’ve talked about it—we’ve had a lot of time for talking over the past few days,” he said, as Harry realized this was his way of expressing that he and Pansy hadn’t felt very useful, and wanted to be doing what the others were doing. “She really wants to do this, and I have to accept that, even if I don’t like it.”

“Look what just happened to Neville and Hermione, Harry,” Pansy pointed out. “I’m certainly not in any worse danger than that, or than you if you got captured. I know what could happen, but I’d be surrounded by ten Aurors. It just doesn’t seem that likely that anything would happen. But even if it was more likely, I’d still want to do this.”

Harry was silent, unhappy but understanding her reasons. Kingsley nodded. “I was going to suggest testing you two, actually. I, we, appreciate your desire to



help.” He made eye contact with both, making the point that he was grateful even if they turned out not to be able to do the spells. “Let’s do it now. Ron, you first.”

Kingsley stood and put the measuring spell on himself. “Harry, a test, please?” Harry fired Blue, and as expected, a gold 100 hung in the air for a second, then vanished. Kingsley gestured to Ron. Ron had his eyes closed, obviously concentrating. Then he opened them and fired at Kingsley. A gold 99 hovered in the air. Ron winced, his disappointment and frustration obvious. “Don’t be discouraged, Ron,” Kingsley advised him. “That’s progress from last time. Just give it more time, it looks obvious that you’re almost there. You’ll get it.” Harry caught Ron’s eye and nodded, hoping to reinforce Kingsley’s thought.

Pansy stood and gave Ron a short kiss before taking position in front of Kingsley. She too concentrated, then fired, and was rewarded with a 100. She smiled and made a brief gesture of triumph. Harry and Ron exchanged a look that made it clear that both had mixed emotions. When Pansy looked at Ron, he smiled, clearly not wanting to be unsupportive of her achievement.

“Okay, Pansy, looks like this means you’re in,” said Kingsley. “We’re going to want you for noon-to-midnight, the one we lost Neville from. I know that after what just happened you may not be that tired, but you need to try to sleep. We’d like you here by noon, but more importantly, I don’t want you here until you’ve had six hours of sleep.

“And one other thing... I hate to do this, but we have to be 100% certain that you can actually do the spells.”

Pansy nodded slowly. “I knew that. I’m not looking forward to it, but it’s a small price to pay for being able to do this.”

“Are you sure you know exactly what to do, Pansy?” asked Harry, concerned.

“Yes, I’ve heard you describe it lots of times, I know what to do.” She concentrated, obviously summoning feelings of love. “Ready.”

Kingsley counted down and fired the Cruciatus Curse. The familiar shield came on, but as expected, a small portion broke through; Pansy screamed and fell to the ground. After Ron helped her up, she asked Kingsley to do it again, as had Neville and Ginny. He did, and the shield blocked the spell completely.

“Okay,” said Kingsley. “If Hermione’s back for the noon shift, we’ll train you to Apparate and work on your response speed. If she’s not, one of us will escort you if we get a call. After what happened, I’m hoping for a quiet night, or even that they’ll give up. They lost three people tonight, and I don’t think they have that many. But of course, we can’t assume anything.” He stood, indicating that the meeting was over. “Harry, Ginny, if you’d go out and take your positions. Ron, Pansy, get some sleep.”

They headed out. Ron intercepted Harry and quietly said, “Would you stop by the Burrow before you go to Hogwarts? I want to talk to you.”

“Sure,” Harry agreed, wondering what it could be. Walking out to his post, he thought of what had happened to Neville and Hermione, and hoped he’d have a chance to catch someone.

The night was quiet, however; there were no Apparations from midnight to noon for the first time in a week. Harry wondered if this meant they had given up, but he doubted it. On their way out, Harry and Ginny passed Pansy, who assured them that she’d had enough sleep.

Back at the Burrow, Ginny went to talk to Molly while Harry went upstairs to look for Ron. He was in his bed, but obviously awake. Harry sat down on the edge of his, facing Ron. “When did you get to sleep?”

“About five, I think.” Ron rubbed his eyes, trying to wake up. “We sat downstairs talking for a few hours after we got back. It wasn’t like we were going to get to sleep soon anyway. We talked about what happened to Neville and Hermione, about the energy of love business, lots of stuff. I told her what I was going to ask you. She thought it was a good idea, although she was surprised I would do it.”

Harry smiled a little, wondering if Ron was deliberately trying to keep him in suspense. “Maybe I will be too, if you tell me what it is.”

Nervously, Ron looked at Harry. “You know I want to do what you guys are doing. You can probably guess how badly I want to do it, and that I was very unhappy that I’m stuck at 99.”

“We don’t know that you’re stuck, Ron. This is the first time it was measured at 99. You could still be getting better.”

Ron shrugged. “That could be, but somehow I don’t think so. I’ve thought for some time that the reason that you four could do it and we couldn’t was that you were couples, you were in love. Pansy and I were heading in that direction, just not quite there yet. Or we were there, but hadn’t said anything. But now we are there... and, you know, it’s great, I’ve never been as happy as I am now. I thought that with that, we both would be able to do the spells, to get 100. But, as you saw... I’m really afraid that that’s as high as it’s going to get for me, that there’s something stopping me. I know you might say it’ll just take longer for me, because of how I am, that it was hard to get used to this kind of thing. But I just don’t think so. I’ve focused hard on love, I’ve said and thought things I never thought I would. I think I’ve gotten rid of that, but something’s still stopping me.

“So, this is what I was thinking. I know you don’t know everything about this, that you’re still learning too, but you know more than anyone. You were able to show them how to do it, even though you didn’t exactly know how to show them. If there’s an expert, you’re it. And now you’re becoming a Legilimens, you can pull out thoughts and memories. I want you to... do Legilimens on me, to look around. I want you to try to work out why I can’t do this, if there’s something stopping me.”

Harry looked at Ron in astonishment. His first thought was, wow, he really wants this badly, to ask this. After he took a few seconds to take in Ron’s request, he said, “Ron, I’m not even sure I know what to say. I mean, first of all, are you sure you really know what you’re asking? I mean, I could see—”

“You could see anything that’s ever happened to me, no matter how embarrassing or private,” Ron finished. “Harry, I know what this involves. I’m not ignorant about it. Hermione’s told me what it’s like, and that she trusts you. You should know I trust you too.”

“I know that, Ron. But it’ll be different than with Hermione. With her, I deliberately focus on love, happiness, things like that. If I do this, I’ll have to look around at different things, and maybe the negative ones more than the positive ones. I could find stuff that you’ve forgotten, that you shut out because it was painful.”

“I didn’t know you could do that,” said Ron, raising his eyebrows a little. “But I don’t care.” He stared at Harry, determined.

“You also understand that not only might it not work, but I’m not even sure what I’d be looking for. It would have to be a kind of thing where I know it when I see it, and maybe not even then. I might even have to deliberately call up things that are secret or embarrassing, because something like that is more likely to be the thing stopping you, if there is anything I can see.”

Ron sighed. “Yes, Harry, I get that. I’m not saying I think it’s going to be a barrel of laughs. But unless you tell me I’m going to suffer permanent brain damage, I’m not changing my mind. Like I said, this is you, you know how I feel about you. Or, you’re going to very soon, anyway. Do you think I’d ask just anyone? Do you think I’d let someone like Snape tromp around in my mind, to dig stuff up? I know what I’m doing.”

Harry had to try to keep a reaction off his face, amazed as he was that Ron had stumbled onto the very thing that was happening with him and Snape. He looked at Ron, and realized he wasn’t going to be able to talk him out of it.

“All right. I assume you want to do this now?” Ron nodded. “Okay, hang on...” He raised his left hand and looked into the palm. “Ginny, I’m going to be a while longer with Ron, I’m not sure how long. Could be as much as an hour.”

“Okay,” he heard her reply in his head. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll explain later,” he said, putting his hand down. To Ron, he added, “I’ll tell her what I did in general, not the specifics, of course.” He got out his wand. “Oh, before I start, let me just make sure of something. Have you told Pansy you love her?”

“Yes,” replied Ron.

“Would you say you’re ‘in love’ with her, not just that you love her?”

Harry felt that Ron had to push back embarrassment for a second before he answered. “Yes, I’m in love with her.”

“Have you told her that?”

Ron thought. “No, not exactly like that. Do you think I should?”

“Well, yes. Not only so you can get 100, but also just because it’ll make her happy. But it also depends on your reason. If you’re not saying it because you’re embarrassed, then you should say it. If it’s because you’re not sure she feels exactly that way about you and you’re worried about getting hurt, that’s different. The reason is important. I mean, last September, I told Hermione and Ginny that I loved them. The only reason I didn’t tell you was that you would have freaked out.”

Ron chuckled at the thought. “Yeah, that’s about right. But would you have really thought it was necessary?”

“What I thought was necessary was that I’d be willing to say it, or rather, that embarrassment wouldn’t stop me from saying it, even if something else would. I felt like I had to totally accept it and not be embarrassed by it, since at first, the whole thing embarrassed me. We’ve talked about this in the sessions, of course. I don’t know that it would be like that for everyone, only that it was for me.”

“I understand,” said Ron. “So, let’s get started.”

“Okay. I think at first, I’m just going to do the basic stuff, like I do with Hermione, just to... I don’t know, get a feel for your mind. Doing this with Hermione felt different than with Albus. Once I get a feeling for it, then I’ll start looking.”

Ron nodded, and Harry started. Calling up feelings of love, he found that thoughts and memories of Pansy predominated, followed by ones involving Hermione and himself, and his parents, especially Molly. He then called up feelings of pride or accomplishment, and found roughly what he expected: memories of winning the Quidditch Cup in fifth year and sixth year, winning the chess match against the board on the way to the Sorcerer's Stone, being named Quidditch captain and prefect.

Harry now struck out in random directions, wanting to see if he got lucky in finding something before looking in specific areas. He discovered that he was already familiar with most memories that came from after they met, but that they had a different feeling and emotional content, since they were Ron's, not his. Doing this, he found nothing that he thought might be important.

He looked now for happy memories in general, with no particular theme, and the fourth one that came up, to Harry's surprise, was Ron watching Harry in the first task of the Triwizard tournament. He felt Ron's happiness for him, but then felt Ron's embarrassment at feeling he'd been irrational in being angry with Harry and helping cause their argument, mixed with a feeling of inadequacy, of feeling he wasn't as good as Harry at most things, and would never be. He felt Ron struggle to put those feelings aside and be happy for Harry, and decide to apologize.

Harry retreated from Ron's mind. "Funny... I hadn't thought that this could be kind of awkward for me, as well as you. I'm sorry, I didn't know you felt that way."

"That's because you've never been Harry Potter's best friend," said Ron with a wry smile. "So you wouldn't see it that way. But yeah, that was almost a perfect example, even not thinking about the argument we'd had. I was happy and impressed that you flew so well, but I couldn't help thinking, 'I couldn't have done that well.' It's hard not to at least think that. By the way, is this relevant to what you're looking for, or—"

“No, I just stopped because I was surprised, I didn’t know about it. But you’re right, if I stop every time something like that happens, we could be here all afternoon.”

Grinning, Ron said, “Yes, and I have a feeling my sister has plans for you. Good thing for you I can’t peek into your memories.”

“You’d definitely find some stuff,” agreed Harry. He continued looking, and found that he unconsciously returned to the theme of Ron feeling inadequate. The first memory to come up was of when he had told Ron that a dream was of him trying and failing to stop a goal because he was angry with Ron and Hermione pressing him to do Occlumency more. He felt Ron’s anger and shame, more intense than Harry had expected due to the Quidditch-related stress Ron had suffered for much of his fifth year.

He again stopped his search. “I’m really, really sorry about that,” he said. “It was not only nasty, but not true. I was dreaming of getting past that door, and I knew I shouldn’t, so I was probably nastier because I knew you and Hermione were right and I didn’t want to be reminded of it. Anyway, especially seeing it from your side, I feel awful about it. I’m sorry.”

Ron nodded. “It’s okay, I understand. The way I was doing at Quidditch must have made a pretty tempting target. It’s funny, probably we’d feel a lot differently about a lot of things if we could see them from the other person’s side, like you are now.”

“I’m sure of that,” agreed Harry. “In fact, that’s one of the things Albus has talked about at night. He hasn’t done this yet, because it doesn’t happen until you go to the spiritual realm, according to him, but he said that after we die we examine our lives kind of like this, but we see everything from the other person’s point of view, and we feel how they felt. He said it’s kind of part of our education.”

“I’ll bet a lot of people would act pretty differently if they knew that, and believed it,” commented Ron. “Can you imagine what that’s going to be like for someone like Voldemort?”

Harry shook his head. “Don’t want to think about that, really. He’ll be there a while, that’s for sure.”

He continued searching, but found nothing that seemed useful. He decided to try specific types of searches, starting with the idea of feelings of embarrassment connected to love. He found that Ron had felt acutely uncomfortable, more than he had let on, when they had started having the energy-of-love sessions, and that it had been an act of will to choose to take part in them at all. He investigated more closely, and found that Ron had had feelings, even recently, of discomfort with the sessions, as though the sessions were silly and he was humoring the others by taking part.

Harry stopped. “I think this could be significant.”

Ron looked doubtful. “Well, I don’t really feel like that. I know that it’s a good thing to be doing, I know it makes sense, that love is important. It’s only a very small part of me that ever thinks that way, only very occasionally. Sometimes you think things you know aren’t right or true, but you think them anyway.”

“I know that, but there’s this feeling I get... it’s like, you have those feelings because there’s some part of you that’s still embarrassed about the whole thing. Like, if anybody but the other five of us could see what you were doing, what they would think. You don’t really think it’s silly, but you do get embarrassed, and it’s like, that kind of thought is a place you go in your mind sometimes when you get embarrassed. Like a safe place, to escape the embarrassment, so you don’t have to feel it. I can totally understand it, but I do think it could be interfering with your progress. Maybe only a little, but in this situation, maybe a little is all it takes.”

Ron slowly nodded. “So, what do you think I should do?”

Harry thought about it. “I guess, try not to have that thought anymore. If you feel embarrassed, don’t run away from it, just let yourself feel embarrassed.”

“I’ve already done that plenty, believe me,” Ron put in.

“I’m sure you have,” said Harry. “I guess I’m saying you should do it all the time, not run away even once. Don’t let there be any place in your mind where you



stand back and look at it from a distance. If you feel yourself going there, come back, and... embrace the embarrassment, I guess. That's what I'd suggest. I can't be sure, of course, but I think it could help. It's just a feeling I get."

"Okay, then I'll do that," Ron agreed. He was still very serious, and it again struck Harry how badly Ron wanted this.

Harry started searching again, and after ten minutes, found something else he thought might be important. After coming across a memory about Umbridge, he decided to look for memories of violence and aggression. A minute later, he found something: he saw Ron using the Cruciatus Curse on Malfoy, torturing him. Surprised, he stopped searching.

Ron spoke before Harry could. "How can you see that?" he asked, puzzled. "That never really happened, obviously. It's just a daydream. Not one I'm especially proud of, of course," Ron continued, as he glanced down in embarrassment, "but I'm sure you can understand why I've had it, with what he did to Pansy."

"I can definitely understand it," he assured Ron. "To answer your first question, I'm not sure. I'm still kind of new at this, and I didn't know I could see things, images, that were just imagination. If I had to guess, I'd say it's because this one is very vivid, very important. I'd imagine it helps you deal with what he did to Pansy."

Ron nodded, clearly still embarrassed at Harry finding it, but making himself talk about it anyway. "I think I first had it the night it happened, when I sat up all night in the infirmary. When she told me what happened, I was just so... even 'furious' doesn't seem to be enough, probably mostly because I was starting to have feelings for her at that point. I think I first had that particular thought that night, and I think I had it most times I thought about what Pansy had been through. It was just too painful to think about what he had done without the idea that he would pay for it somehow." He chuckled ruefully. "Seems kind of pathetic when I really look at it, which I never had before. Let me ask you, Harry... you

must have felt like this, too. You're very close to her, and you're the one she did it for. How do you not have thoughts like that?"

It was a good question, Harry thought. After thinking for a minute, he said, "I think at this point I just channel it differently. Like I said a while ago, the thing with Lestrage at the end of the fifth year kind of immunized me. Thinking about torturing Malfoy wouldn't help me at all. Some conversations I had with Albus about Voldemort, about evil, probably helped. People like Malfoy, their lives are so empty because they're full of evil. Love is wonderful, but they're never going to really feel it, and I feel sorry for them. I think at some point I started seeing evil as... like a force of nature, or something. Like being mad at a hurricane, there's no point. I think with her, I just focused on her, trying to help her, rather than being mad at Malfoy. After she showed me what happened in the Pensieve... it was a struggle to accept it, because she had done it all to save my life. I told her how much I loved her, how proud of her I was, and of course I gave that speech. That helped a lot; I felt like I had done what I could. I don't know if you could easily do the same thing; you haven't had the experiences I've had. I think it's harder to draw lessons that really sink in from other people's experiences than from your own. I mean, look at what just happened to Neville. He knew my experiences, but when the time came, it didn't help him. He had to go through it himself, just like I did."

Ron gently shook his head in sadness. "Poor Neville... what he went through was worse than any of us ever have, even you."

Harry nodded. "That's for sure. I don't know exactly what we can do to help him, but I know we will. I suppose it'll be Hermione most of all."

"Is he going to get in trouble for that? I mean, it is seriously against the law. When you did it, nobody else saw, but forty other people saw him. I was worried about that."

Harry shook his head. "No, I asked Kingsley about that during my shift. Aurors have a kind of a code, I guess you could say. They're very close, as you know. They take care of their own, and they judge their own. They would turn him

over to the Ministry if he had done something really outrageous, and if he had done it with deliberate intent. But, as Kingsley said, he was acting out of blind rage, and he had plenty of reason. No non-Auror except for us will know what he did, and they'll take care of him. They're extremely sad for him, just like we are."

"That's good, I'm glad they feel that way about him," said Ron. "So, anyway, do you have any suggestions for this Malfoy thing? Do you think it's really important?"

"I'm not sure. It could be. My... intuition, which Albus is always trying to get me to use, says that it is. It seems very possible that you can't use the energy of love if you're harboring violent thoughts and desires. I mean, I hope you never have to learn this lesson yourself, like I did, like Neville will. I'm very sure that Neville will end up feeling worse for what he did, not better. Maybe you can learn from us. Imagine how you would feel after you tortured Malfoy. You would feel empty, like I did. It wouldn't help you any, it wouldn't change what Pansy suffered. You'll be a better person, better able to help and support Pansy, if you can somehow set that aside and become the kind of person who wouldn't torture anybody, or even want to—even if they deserved it. I'm not saying it's easy, but it's the only answer I can think of. Remember what Albus said last year—what we do to others, we do to ourselves. If you can think of it that way—and I do think it's true—it may help you to not feel that way."

Ron nodded thoughtfully. "Okay, I understand. Well, that gives me a lot to think about, which is good, because I have lots of time. Do you think we should do any more, or do you think that's enough for now?"

Harry shrugged. "I suppose you never know what you might find, but these two things seem pretty likely, and I'm not sure how many things you could work on at once anyway. Probably stopping now is a good idea. We can always try again if it doesn't work."

Ron nodded, and they stood. "Thanks, I appreciate it."

“No problem,” said Harry. He turned to leave, and was almost out the door when he heard Ron say, “Um, Harry...”

He turned and saw Ron looking down nervously, in what appeared to be serious embarrassment. Ron opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, and it suddenly dawned on Harry what Ron was going to say. Harry had to squelch an impulse to say, ‘It’s okay, I understand,’ as he realized that Ron needed to prove to himself that he could do this. With great sympathy for what Ron was trying to do, Harry kept his face as expressionless as he could. No jokes, no smiling, he told himself.

Finally, Ron spoke. Looking alternately down and at Harry, he nervously said, “Look, I know you know this already, but... I love you.” Now Ron smiled in embarrassment, and Harry allowed himself to smile as well.

“I know, I love you too,” replied Harry with some embarrassment. “And don’t worry, I know why you said it. I’m impressed, you didn’t work up to it, like trying it with Ginny or your parents. You did the hardest one first.”

“Just decided to jump in the deep end, I guess,” said Ron, and Harry was startled that again Ron had by chance used a phrase significant to him. “Besides, either you can do it or you can’t. If I was going to deal with the embarrassment, it might as well be now. Ginny, Mum, and Dad will be easy now.” Now, Ron smiled again, though not from embarrassment. “It was very hard not to make a joke about it, but I felt like it wouldn’t count if I did.”

“I can understand that,” said Harry. “I thought of one, too.”

“What was yours?” asked Ron.

Smiling, Harry said, “Mine was, ‘now, when you say that, do you mean you’re *in* love with me, or...’” He trailed off as they both burst out laughing.

“That’s a good one,” chuckled Ron. “Mine was, ‘of course, I know there are things that Ginny can offer you that I can’t...’” They laughed again, then Ron added, “Yours was better, though.”

Harry shrugged. “Lots of possibilities for humor in there. Good thing Fred and George aren’t lurking with a pair of Extendable Ears, we’d never hear the end of it.”

“No way would I have even had any of this conversation if they were in the house at all,” said Ron emphatically. “Good thing they’re so devoted to the shop.”

“Well, I should get going,” said Harry.

“I’m going downstairs too, still haven’t eaten,” said Ron, following Harry out the door. They walked downstairs and, to Harry’s surprise, saw Hermione in the living room. She, Ginny, and Molly were on the sofa, talking.

“Hermione!” said Harry. He sat on a chair next to her, and took her hand. “How’s he doing?”

“Pretty bad, as I was just telling them,” said Hermione, not looking too well herself, Harry thought; she was as shaken and depressed as he had ever seen her. “It would be bad enough if it were only his grandmother being killed, or only the thing with the Death Eaters, but for both... well, he’s a mess, of course. He was going to try to go to sleep when I left. I hope he can, he’ll need it. This is going to be really hard for him.”

“And for you, too,” Ron pointed out. “You didn’t exactly have a picnic.”

“So much more happened to him that I don’t think about what happened to me so much,” said Hermione. “I just spent most of the night trying to help him... by the way, Harry, I don’t know if you know this, but Fawkes showed up and sang for a while. I think it helped both of us, it was sweet of him. And of you, since I know he wouldn’t do that unless we were both people you felt very close to. Not to mention, finding us and saving our lives.”

“I’m glad he did that, well, both of them,” said Harry. “He really is a comfort.”

Molly got up and headed to the kitchen. “There’s not that much more I can tell you,” Hermione continued. “I just, you know, tried to comfort him as best I

could. Cassandra did too, she was in and out. There's only so much you can do, though."

"I know what you mean," agreed Harry. "When I—"

He interrupted himself as several owls flew into the room, each one dropping a letter into their laps. With a quizzical look at each other, they opened the letters as the owls flew off. Harry's contained no salutation or signature, and simply read: 'In your fifth year, your friends Ron and Hermione talked about your behavior behind your back, in very uncomplimentary ways. They wondered if the Prophet was right in what it said about you. What do you think?'

Harry looked up at the others, amazed. "What in the hell...?" he said to himself, as the others wore equally shocked or upset looks. "Are all of yours like mine? Saying you guys said nasty things about me?"

"Not nasty, in my case, but... something like that, yes," said Ginny, looking angry and confused. Harry and Ginny exchanged letters; Ginny's read, 'You should know that Harry thought about Pansy for a girlfriend before he picked you. He told her, but he didn't tell you. He must not have thought you could take it.'

They switched back as Harry said to Ginny, "It's not a lie, strictly speaking, but this makes it sound bad, which it really wasn't." Hermione took Harry's letter as he took hers; Ron clearly didn't want anyone to see his letter. Hermione's said, 'You might want to take a break from self-righteous crusades for a while. Harry and Ron were just humoring you by signing your O.W.L. petition, and a lot of Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs were angry with you for risking their O.W.L.s. They didn't say anything because they were afraid of suddenly getting bad cases of spots, like the "sneak." And the house-elves at Hogwarts even dislike you! "She is nosing into our business..." "She thinks we is stupid, that we doesn't know about her silly hats..." When you can't even get house-elves to like you, honey, you know you have problems. The trials of always being right, of always knowing better than others. Life is so hard.'

"Hermione's is the longest, that's for sure," said Harry. "But who—"

Hermione gasped. “It’s Rita Skeeter, it has to be. She called me ‘honey’ once, and who else could get this kind of information? She—”

Molly walked into the room, crestfallen, holding a letter. “What is going on?” she asked, looking at Harry. “Someone says that when Percy died, you and Ginny were talking to Fred and George about how you didn’t really like Percy, that you didn’t care...” She looked on the verge of tears.

Harry tried to keep down his mounting fury at what was happening. He knew the potential for emotional damage here was high; it was clear to him that whoever was writing the letters was putting events in the worst possible context. Making a sudden decision, Harry took out his wand. He approached Molly, silently erasing from her memory everything that had happened since just before getting the letter. As she suddenly looked blank, then confused, he took the letter and envelope from her, and put them and his wand into his robes. Then he hugged her and said, “I love you, Molly.”

“Oh, Harry, thank you... I love you, too...” said Molly, looking pleased and a little disoriented. “That’s strange, there was something I was going to say, but I can’t remember... oh, well. I’m going to go upstairs, see you all later.” She walked up the stairs.

He walked back to the others, who all wore stunned looks. “Are you crazy?” asked Ron in disbelief. “Do you know how illegal that is? Not to mention—”

Harry shoved the letter in front of Ron as Ginny peered over to see it. “Whoever’s doing this is trying to hurt all of us, or turn us against each other. I’m sorry, but I’m not going to see her hurt like that, not about this. She suffered so much already.”

“And this would just open up the wounds again, and rub salt in them,” said Ginny, having read the letter. “I think you did the right thing, Harry, reading this. This would have devastated her, and even us explaining how it really was wouldn’t have helped much.”

“The common factor,” said Harry, “seems to be to take true events but twist them, making them look as bad as possible. Sounds like Rita Skeeter, all right. Not to mention that it explains how she knows all this.” He read aloud the letter Ginny received, then said, “What actually happened was that when I saw Pansy’s attack in the Pensieve, one thing she said to Malfoy when he asked her if I loved her was that she didn’t deserve me, and never could. I didn’t want her thinking that, so I told her that in the months before I fell in love with Ginny, I’d thought about the idea of having a girlfriend, and that I’d thought about Ginny, but also about her, the point being that I never thought she wasn’t good enough for me. The letter makes it seem like I seriously thought about it, but it was just daydreams, and I only didn’t mention it to Ginny because it didn’t seem important. I just thought it was important for Pansy to know, so she didn’t think I thought she wasn’t good enough. I have a feeling that all these letters will be like that. Ron, what does yours say?”

Ron looked as though he was trying hard to keep his temper down. “You may as well see it, you already know,” he said shortly. Frowning, Harry picked up the letter. It said, ‘I think you may not know that Pansy has been... intimate with Draco Malfoy. Harry and Hermione know, but it seems like they didn’t think it was anything that would concern you.’ Harry cringed and handed the letter to Hermione. To Ron, Harry said, “This is like the others, it’s not as bad as it sounds.”

“Did you see what that said?” Ron shouted. “How can that not be bad?”

“What is it?” Ginny asked, puzzled. Harry saw Hermione gasp as she read the letter.

Harry pulled Ron up from where he was sitting. “Come here, into the kitchen,” he said, tugging Ron, trusting Hermione to explain to Ginny why she couldn’t be told what was in the letter.

In the kitchen, Ron wheeled on Harry. “Okay, what is it? How can this be ‘not as bad as it sounds?’ It sounds pretty bad!”

Harry wished Pansy were there so she could tell Ron herself, but she was on duty with the Aurors, and Harry knew that Ron couldn’t wait ten minutes, much



less than ten hours. “The letter makes it sound like it was something she wanted to do, which it wasn’t,” said Harry. “It happened the day after Easter vacation, the day Crabbe blew up. She was trying to get him to tell her how he was planning to kill me. He agreed to tell her, only if she let him... touch her,” he said, hoping his tone indicated what he meant without his having to provide more detail. “So, that was her choice. Let him do that, and save my life, or not do it, and I’d die.”

Ron stared straight ahead, his expression becoming anguished. He stared at Harry for a second, then slowly sat down at the table. “Why didn’t she tell me?” he asked, his voice heavy.

“She didn’t want you to have to know, to have to think about it. She wanted to spare you that. It wasn’t that she was ashamed of it. Her exact words to me at the time were, ‘it was revolting, but I’m proud that I did it.’ She was proud that she was willing to do something that disgusted her, to save me. And there’s a part of me that wishes she hadn’t done it, even given what would have happened.”

Harry could tell from Ron’s expression that he was no longer angry with Pansy, but his emotions were still in turmoil. “I can imagine how you must have felt, being the one she did it for. Why did she tell you?”

“I think it was more the whole thing that she wanted me to see, not only that. That just happened to be mentioned. Malfoy was outraged that she did that, for that reason. We think it was one of the reasons he tortured her so badly, he was furious at being fooled like that. As for Hermione knowing, she just figured it out; when Pansy signaled, Hermione saw them in a couples’ place on the map.”

“So, if she hadn’t signaled, right then...” Ron trailed off. “Harry, you know that daydream about Malfoy? It’s coming back to me... and now, Rita Skeeter’s in it too. Is this the part where I’m supposed to just think about love?”

“Kind of, I guess,” replied Harry. “I can really understand why you’re having those thoughts. But, yeah, I guess the thing to do is think about Pansy instead. Funny, I sort of feel... responsible, since I’m the one she did it for.”

“I have to talk to her, Harry. I know she’s on duty, but I have to talk to her.”

Ginny ran into the kitchen. “Hermione just left. We were talking, and it suddenly dawned on her that Neville probably got one of those too. In his state...”

“Oh, my God,” said Harry. “I hadn’t thought of that. That’s the last thing he needs right now. He probably has it already.”

“Yeah, and given how much she hates Hermione, it’s probably pretty awful,” agreed Ginny. “We should get down there too, we might be able to help explain whatever it is. Neville won’t know what it is when he gets it, or that it’s deliberately distorted.”

“Dammit,” said Harry. “Okay, let’s go. Ron, I’ll replace Pansy for the time being, you can talk to her. Ginny, tell Kingsley what’s going on, then see if Hermione needs any help with Neville.” They headed to the fireplace.

Harry and Ginny walked into the Apparation detection room; Ron waited in the standby room, as only authorized personnel were allowed in the detection room. Harry thought that Kingsley might be off duty by now, but he was still there. Harry walked up to Pansy, who was studying maps. “Pansy,” said Harry, “did you get a—”

She held up a letter of the same type as the rest had gotten. “What does it say?” Harry asked. She handed it to him silently, obviously upset. Harry read to himself, ‘Hermione and Ginny don’t think you can make it work with Ron.’ He sighed with relief. “Thank God, it’s not so bad. Listen—”

“What do you mean, ‘not so bad?’ What’s going on, anyway? Who is this from, and why?”

“We think they’re from Rita Skeeter, and that she’s striking back at Hermione. We all got them. As for this, I was there when this was said, and it’s not what she makes it sound like. They were worried that in an argument someday, Ron might, in a moment of anger, bring up your past, and it could damage your relationship. They were worried about you, not thinking you couldn’t make it work.”

Pansy thought for a few seconds. “I suppose I can see where they might worry about that. It would be pretty bad, and I’ve wondered about it too. Everyone got them?”

“Yes, and the reason we’re here is that Ron needs to talk to you. The subject of his is what you did for me that day, to get Malfoy to tell you—”

“Oh, no,” said Pansy, looking stricken. “How did she know?”

“She’s a beetle Animagus, Pansy, she can be anywhere. She must have been in the room and we couldn’t see her. She made it sound much worse than it was, in the letter. I had to tell Ron what it really was right away, I’m sure he was imagining much worse things. He needed to talk to you, he’s in the other room. I’ll fill in for you, take as much time as you need.”

“Thank you, Harry,” she said, and rushed out of the room. Harry looked around and saw Ginny finish talking to Kingsley, then head out, he assumed to Neville’s quarters.

Kingsley walked over to Harry. “Well,” he said gravely, “it appears that what Hermione did with Skeeter was not the swiftest of ideas.”

“Certainly seems that way now,” agreed Harry, keeping an eye on the map board, trying to be ready to Disapparate at a second’s notice.

“Now, how did she do this? She just hung around you and your group for two years, since Hermione caught her?”

“At least at some times, anyway,” said Harry. “Some of the information is from two years ago, some from last year, even some from this summer. So, probably she was around at various times. We don’t know how much. We don’t know for certain that it was her, but Hermione’s sure, and it makes sense.”

“So, she could have been around at any point when you were in for training, she could have heard me telling you about the Auror code.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, she could.”

Kingsley took a breath. “That is... less than ideal. That is really not something I would like to see printed in the Prophet.”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Harry agreed. “But now that she’s known, is the Prophet really going to print anything she got while illegally being an Animagus?”

“Hard to say,” said Kingsley. “They sometimes toe the Ministry line, but sometimes not when they get something sensational. I have a friend at the Prophet, maybe it’s time to give him a call.”

“Sorry about the disruption,” Harry said, referring to his replacing Pansy. “We’re just in kind of a crisis mode right now. Bad enough for this to happen anytime, but during this time, and with Neville and Hermione...”

Kingsley nodded, and walked off. After twenty minutes, Pansy came back in. “Thanks, Harry, I appreciate it. We both did.”

“No problem,” said Harry. “Is everything okay now?”

“Mostly,” she said confidently. “We still need to talk more—like, several hours, probably—but for now it’s okay. I apologized for not telling him, I understand now I really should have. It’s like what Ginny said to you, that she wants to share in your life, both the good and the bad. Ron said pretty much the same thing, even though we’re not committed like you are; he wouldn’t want me to shoulder something like that alone, even if it would be hard for him to know. But he understands why I did it, and I know he doesn’t have the impression that that bitch wanted him to have. Yes, I’m a little annoyed at her,” added Pansy sarcastically.

“Hermione’s going to be more than a little annoyed if what Skeeter wrote to Neville is as bad as I think it’s going to be,” said Harry. “I should go see how that’s going.”

“See you later,” said Pansy as he walked off. As he passed Kingsley, Kingsley reminded him to get some sleep at some point. He found Ron, and they walked to where the guest quarters were. Once they got close, they were guided by the sound of loud crying. They entered a room and saw Ginny holding Hermione, who was clearly in the middle of a prolonged cry. She looked up at Ron and Harry as if to tell them what had happened, but started crying again instead. Ron sat down to

hold her, and Ginny took Harry's hand and led him out of the room. They found a nearby room empty.

"I guess I don't have to ask if it was bad," Harry observed.

Ginny took out a letter from her robes. "This is the letter Neville got," she said. Harry opened it and read: 'You might not be aware, but Hermione doesn't like your grandmother very much. Not so long ago, she said, "I'll be happy when I don't have to worry about what his grandmother thinks anymore.'" Wonder what she meant by that... You see, Hermione always thinks she knows what's right, so she'll be right there, ready to take over for your grandmother, telling you what to do. She also said, "Neville will be good once he's trained." How's the training going? And you know she's doing Legilimency with Harry, but you don't know that she's opening up your most private moments to him. He already saw what you did at the Burrow over Easter, and she's going to show him more. She could protect your privacy by putting those memories in the Pensieve, but she's not going to. It seems as though she doesn't have much respect for your privacy.'

He looked at Ginny glumly. "This is really bad, even worse than I thought it was going to be. That one about his grandmother... I can only imagine what he thought, especially in his state. I assume the quotes are accurate?"

She nodded. "I was there for both. They're exactly right, but again, taken out of context. When she said the one about his grandmother, we were talking about the idea of him moving out of her house, living by himself. You probably know that they'd been arguing about how he let his grandmother run his life, as she put it. Hermione was looking forward to his living on his own, so he wouldn't have to answer to her. But him reading that right now... he had to think she was looking forward to his grandmother dying. And the Legilimency thing, that's really bad too. What she said looks really bad if you don't know the whole situation, but she can't tell him the whole situation. How in the world is she going to explain that to him?"

"Anyway, of course she was already with him when I got there, but it seemed to be going badly. He basically seemed to have shut down. I heard him

saying, 'I can't deal with this, I can't deal with this.' Hermione was crying and trying to tell him what happened, but he just wasn't responding. Then Cassandra came in and gave him some stuff to get him to sleep. Hermione was mad at Cassandra, but Cassandra did the right thing. She wasn't going to get anything coherent out of him; she's barely coherent herself. They've both been awake for about thirty hours, had trauma... and now this. When Hermione was crying just now, she managed to say that she was afraid that Neville would leave her. I really don't think he will, but I can see why she's worried. I would be if I was her."

"How much had they been arguing about his grandmother?" asked Harry.  
"I wasn't really aware of that."

"It wasn't terrible, but there had definitely been stress. Neville's plans always depended on what his grandmother would allow, which really frustrated Hermione. She said at one point, 'he's a month shy of being an adult, but she still has him on a tight leash.' Glad Skeeter didn't throw that one in there as well. Hermione felt it wasn't healthy, that Neville should assert himself more. He's asserted himself in different ways over the past year that he hadn't before, just not with his grandmother. Hermione felt that he was so used to doing everything she said that he didn't think to question it, and she was afraid that nothing was going to change when he turned seventeen. And if nothing changed then, when would it? She was having visions of having to get his grandmother's permission to go on dates with him in five years. And I don't have it from his side, but I'm sure he was upset too. He probably felt that she was pushing too hard, or asking too much too soon. She was putting him in an uncomfortable position. So, it was difficult for both of them. Now, with his grandmother dying... you can just see him saying to her, the next time they argue, 'well, you got what you wanted, she's gone, you don't have to fight her anymore.' She obviously didn't want his grandmother to die, just to let go of him a bit, but it's going to be hard for him to make that distinction, especially at first. It's going to be hard for them."

Harry shook his head sadly. "I wonder if she timed this deliberately, if she heard about what happened and rushed those letters out. It would be really cold-hearted, but it wouldn't surprise me."

Ginny stood. "Come on, let's go back and see how she's doing." They walked back to the room Hermione was in. She was talking with Ron, and looked up at Harry and Ginny. "So you saw the letter," she said despondently. "What do you think?"

Harry felt he had to be honest. "It's bad. But I don't think you're going to lose him. He just needs to recover a bit from what happened. He'll see things for how they really are, in time."

"It's hard for me to think that right now," she said. "I'm too worried... and when I'm not thinking about that, I find myself imagining all kinds of grisly ways Skeeter could die. My favorite right now is, getting stepped on. Either as a beetle, by me, or as herself, by a giant. Either would be okay. I mean, you know me, Harry, I'm not a violent person. I was sad that Goyle died. But this is just so... sick, especially after what happened. The timing was no accident, I'm sure of it. To do this to someone who suffered what Neville did is just depraved. Morally speaking, she's no different than a Death Eater to me."

Harry didn't quite see it that way—Skeeter had committed no violence, and probably wouldn't—but he could see why Hermione did, and had no inclination to quibble with her. "It'll be okay, Hermione," he said. "It's really hard right now, but it'll get better. Come on, you should go back to the Burrow, try to get some sleep. Fawkes will sing to you."

Ron took Hermione's hand and helped her up, then put a comforting arm around her. They walked out of the room, headed for the fireplace.

It was almost three o'clock when Harry and Ginny finally made it to his Hogwarts quarters. Again very tired, they fell asleep almost immediately.

Harry found himself at the phoenix place, standing next to Dumbledore. “Albus! I’m surprised. I thought you weren’t going to meet me while this Auror thing went on. I’m happy to see you, of course.”

“Thank you, Harry. As I always am to see you. And I did not in fact originally plan to meet you, but circumstances suggested that it was a good idea tonight, or should I say, today. I personally will not have much to say, as I wish to keep the interruption of your sleep to a minimum. But it should not surprise you to learn that Esmerelda Longbottom is here, and has a few words to say to Neville.”

“It does surprise me, I guess, because I hadn’t thought about it,” Harry admitted. “It was such a busy, and bad, day...”

“Very understandable, it was indeed trying. Before I summon Esmerelda, I sense you have a question. You wish to understand why I did not use my ability to incapacitate Voldemort during the confrontation, and perhaps facilitate his capture.” Harry nodded. “The answer is, because it would have done no good. Had I done it before you arrived, the Death Eaters would simply have tortured Neville and Hermione for information as to how it happened. Had I done it after you arrived, it would have made no difference, as Lucius Malfoy was carrying the device which allowed their entire party to escape. They would simply have carried Voldemort away. By the way, you should know that your anti-Disapparation field was successful; Voldemort at one point attempted to Disapparate, but failed. I suspect this means that in all such future confrontations in which Voldemort expects to have contact with you, he will carry some such device as to provide a certain means of escape.

“I will now summon Esmerelda. Please also convey to Neville my love, and that of his parents.” Mrs. Longbottom appeared, wearing what Harry remembered as her normal clothes. Her face, however, was kind and gentle, not strict and forbidding as he was accustomed to seeing it.

“Neville, my darling... I am very glad to have this opportunity to say to you things I could not manage to say to you before. First of all, I love you. I did say that



on occasion, but not nearly as often as I should have. Had I said that as often as I criticized you, and vice versa, I would have been a much better parent. But your parents were right when they said I did the best I could.

“I want to apologize for focusing my attention on such things as achievements, ability, family honor, marks, and so on, when I should have focused it on the kind of person you are, which I now understand is far more important. You are, and always have been, a very good person. I did not understand or recognize that as I should have. I also want to make sure you know that you should not consider yourself in any way responsible for what happened. I knew the risks, and I chose what I chose. Please do not spend any time thinking you could have or should have done something differently.

“I know that my presence in your life was too constricting; I did not allow you the kind of freedom you should have had. We were both caught up in a dynamic that I created, but neither could escape. You were conditioned to seek my approval for things you need not have, given your age, and I wanted you to continue to do so. If Hermione and I have one thing in common, it is a tendency to think we are always right. It is a failing, both in her and in me. What has happened in the past day will give her the opportunity to see past it, if she can manage to do so. What Rita Skeeter did, and the timing, were not an accident. Things happen for a reason. You and Hermione have the chance to work out problems that you would have had to in the future, but with more difficulty then. Tendencies have not yet had a chance to become firm patterns, as they did with you and me.

“I know that you are not certain right now whether or not you will have a future with Hermione. You must make your own decision, of course. My advice to you, for what it is worth, is to stay with her. Mostly because you love each other, and partly because you will both have a chance to learn from this and change your behavior. Yes, you both; Hermione may be controlling at times, as I was, but you need not be controlled. You are a participant, you contribute to the situation. She is the way she is, and you are the way you are. She can change, and so can you. It will

not be easy for either of you, but this is an excellent opportunity. Again, things do not happen by accident: there is a reason you two have found each other and fallen in love. You bring out in each other that which you need to change, in order to learn about yourselves and be happy, and love is a powerful motivation to do so. I know you both can do it; it is just a question of your willingness to make the effort necessary.

“What I want for you more than anything is to be loved and to be happy. You have it in your power to be both; the rest is up to you. I will be moving on to the next place now. You will not see me again in this life, but you will see me again. I love you, and always will. Goodbye.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry woke up at a few minutes after nine. Ginny rolled over to lean against him and smiled in such a way that Harry knew what she was going to suggest before she did. “So,” she said, raising her eyebrows a little, “how about going for a swim?”

Harry chuckled and wondered if that was what she was going to call it from now on. “I’d love to, of course, but we could have time problems. Professor Snape said last night that while this Apparation thing goes on, if he calls me, it’ll be between nine-thirty and ten.”

She looked at the clock. “Okay, so we have twenty-five minutes. Plenty of time.”

He smiled and kissed her. “I’m really glad, and lucky, that you are the way you are about this. It makes it really nice.”

“Being with you makes it easy,” she answered. She kissed him, and they stopped talking.

Twenty-five minutes later, at exactly nine-thirty, Harry’s pendant vibrated in the familiar way that indicated a signal from Snape. “Wow, what timing,” he said,

wiping the sweat from his forehead. "One minute earlier would not have been good."

He reached for the pendant to speak into it, but heard Snape's voice first. "Was it not explained to you, Professor, that when I signal, your end becomes an open channel immediately?"

Harry and Ginny exchanged an 'oops' grimace. "Sorry, Professor, I forgot."

"Evidently," said Snape in a very dry tone. "What is your availability?"

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Very well," Snape replied, breaking the connection.

Harry lay back down and put an arm around Ginny, who snuggled on his shoulder. "Think he's going to make some remark about that?" she asked.

Harry's expression indicated his indifference. "He might. But obviously I don't take it the way I would have before, since the situation is so different. Then, it would have been at my expense in a mean way. Now, it would be at my expense in a way intended to be humorous. It's a subtle difference."

"Well, as long as you can tell," she said, amused. "Why did you tell him fifteen minutes? You could have gone now."

"I just didn't want to jump up and go right then. It's not like he expects me to come the instant he calls, which is why he calls a bit earlier than he expects me there."

"I'm definitely glad to keep you here for another few minutes," she said. "So, what was the thing in Ron's letter, anyway? I never did find that out."

"I can't tell you. It's something extremely private about Pansy, something that I knew about her but Ron didn't. Skeeter was taunting him about that."

"It must've been pretty bad. I saw Ron's face, and he was really unhappy."

Harry nodded. "That's partly because she made it sound worse than it was, but he didn't know that when he first read it. But I explained it to him, they talked, and it's going to be okay. Were you bothered by what was in your letter?"

“My first reaction was that it was just... strange,” she explained. “Like, why is someone telling me this? It was just very odd. I was mad at the obvious nastiness of the letter, but I didn’t take it that seriously, and then even less after you explained it. It was a very nice thing for you to say, actually, to let her know that you could have felt that way about her. Of course, it’s easy for me to be magnanimous, I’m the one that ended up with you.” She shifted position, resting on her elbow, and looked him in the eye. “You know what makes me really happy?”

Doing his best to keep a straight face, he replied, “Yes, but unfortunately, I have to leave in fifteen minutes.”

She chuckled. “Besides that. What makes me happy is that... probably Skeeter spent a fair amount of time around you that you didn’t know, some of it recently. She had opportunity to hear you talk, a lot, when I wasn’t around... and what she wrote in my letter was the worst thing she could think of, to try to hurt us. That means that you haven’t said anything to anyone that would make me feel bad if I heard it, that you haven’t kept any secrets from me. Most people don’t get a chance to find that out in the way I just did. It’s easy to keep secrets, it’s easy to say things about people when you don’t think they’ll find out. You never did that. That makes me really happy.” She leaned over and kissed him.

“I’m glad,” he said, her happiness causing him to feel a warm glow of contentment. “I never thought about it, really. I mean, I’m just so in love with you, I can’t imagine what I would say, like that.”

“I don’t think it’s a matter of how much you’re in love,” she said. “I mean, look at Hermione. She loves Neville a whole lot, but she said things that she’s going to regret. And it’s not as though Neville did something to make her say those things. There were just... circumstances in their relationship that were hard for her, like the situation with his grandmother, that we don’t have.”

“No, I’m pretty lucky with the in-law situation,” said Harry.

“To tell you the truth,” Ginny said reluctantly, “she obviously exaggerated and distorted it, but there was a lot that Skeeter said about Hermione that was more

or less accurate. For example, Hermione is right a lot of the time, but she acts like she's right all the time, which makes her less able to deal with it when she's wrong. She made a huge mistake with Skeeter. She should have made her stop writing about us, but not stop writing altogether. She's been sitting around for two years with nothing to do but nurse a grudge, no wonder she hung around us. She was looking for ways to hurt Hermione, and she did it.

"I'm also sure that Skeeter was right about the house-elves, though the way she said it was cruel. I don't doubt they said those things. And I did hear that a few people were afraid to cross Hermione on the Astronomy O.W.L. thing. And where Hermione's 'I-know-best' thing hurts worst is with Neville. He's still kind of passive and... easily dominated, I guess, and Skeeter hit just the right note to hurt them both with the 'she's going to take over where your grandmother left off' thing. Neville's bound to think, do I want someone telling me what to do all my life? And if the answer is 'no,' he's going to start thinking just what Skeeter wants him to. I'm sure Skeeter would consider it a major victory to break them up. You can't hurt anyone worse than that."

Harry thought for a minute. "I guess one question to ask is, did Skeeter deserve what Hermione did to her? I'm not sure I know the answer."

"I think the question Albus would ask is, what were Hermione's motives? Did she act out of a desire to protect herself and you from lies being told about you? Did she do it on behalf of future people who Skeeter didn't get a chance to lie about and hurt because Hermione stopped her from writing? She might say she did, or even think she did, but it's hard not to think that her main motive was revenge. And if it was... like Albus said, what we do to another, we do to ourselves. Hermione's getting back what she gave out, only worse."

"But Skeeter started it," Harry pointed out. "Of course, Albus would say that didn't matter, that because someone does something that hurts us doesn't justify hurting them back. As I learned, the hard way, a year ago."

She kissed him on the cheek and looked at him with sympathy. “Of course, that’s easy to say, difficult to do. If someone did something to hurt you badly, I can’t say that I wouldn’t dedicate my life to making them suffer... because you mean so much to me.”

“I hope you wouldn’t,” he said seriously. “But I see the point. It is a lot harder in the actual situation, and I’m not inclined to judge Hermione.” He looked at the clock. “Looks like I need to get dressed and get going,” he said, reaching for the bag he had brought from the Burrow with clean clothes.

“Oh, sure, and leave me to deal with the dirty clothes strewn all over the floor,” joked Ginny. “Is this how it’s going to be when we’re married?”

Smiling, Harry emptied the bag with the clean clothes and pointed his wand at the floor. All the dirty clothes flew off the floor and into the bag. “Never let it be said that I didn’t do my part,” he said as he got dressed.

“That’s pretty good,” she said, obviously impressed. “Where’d you learn that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t remember that I learned it particularly. I think it’s just an offshoot of what the Aurors taught me about moving multiple objects. Same idea.”

“Well, you may be useful around the house after all,” she said, as she too got dressed. “I’ll meet you back at the Burrow.” He kissed her and left.

He walked into Snape’s office exactly on time. “Good evening, Professor,” said Snape politely. “No doubt you are feeling... rejuvenated.”

Harry chuckled. “She wondered if you would say anything. Sorry about that, I just have to get used to it. But I suppose I needed to feel a bit rejuvenated. It was quite a long, hard day. I assume you heard about most of it.”

Snape nodded. “I have decided that I will depart from my usual practice and focus on the events of your most recent day. It will be useful for me to know more clearly what is happening.” Harry stared ahead, focusing on love, as Snape accessed

Harry's memories of the past day. He saw Snape hit all the high points: the rescue of Neville and Hermione, and Hermione's account of it, receiving the letters, and Harry's conversation with Ron. He saw Snape smirk when Ron mentioned not letting Snape look through his memories, and to his surprise, Snape positively snarled when he saw Harry and Ron joking about Ron's 'I love you.'

After Snape retreated from Harry's mind, Harry asked, "What was the problem?"

Snape glared at Harry. "Any branch of magic which requires two men to say they love each other has too high a price, no matter how otherwise useful."

Harry was not surprised that Snape felt this way, but rather at the strength of the feeling. "It's not necessarily a requirement, I think you know. It was just something Ron felt like he had to be able to do. But it seemed like what really upset you was our joking about it. People joke about that kind of stuff all the time."

"There is nothing funny about perversion," shot back Snape. Harry raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. Snape calmed himself, then said, "It is not my place to... editorialize about what I see here. I was simply answering your question. Do you think that Mr. Weasley will succeed in using your spells the next time he attempts it?"

Harry wondered if Snape was trying to deliberately move the subject away from his reactions. "My guess is that he will, and if he does, that the reason will be what he said to me. As you've heard me say before, I think that using the energy of love requires a total commitment to the idea, and Ron showed that commitment by doing something he was extremely uncomfortable doing." Suddenly curious about Snape's opinion, he asked, "Let me ask you... do you think I should try to teach this in my classes?"

Snape looked at Harry with disdain. "Surely you are joking. Having no hope of learning it myself, I am singularly unqualified to offer an opinion."

Harry frowned. “But you know what it is intellectually. You know what I had to do to get it to work, you’ve seen my memories. You can’t give an objective opinion?”

“I cannot properly identify with what would be required of those students being taught, so I cannot speculate. You, Professor, are the person best qualified to make that judgment, and after that, those whom you have successfully taught. I suggest you ask their opinions.”

Harry nodded. “I’d like to ask another question, if you don’t mind... do you think Hermione was justified in what she did to Skeeter?”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “I gather from your use of the word ‘justified’ that you are seeking an opinion based on morality, which I am again unqualified to offer. My view is simply that an action is to be judged on its expected consequences. If the desired consequences outweigh the undesired consequences, and no more favorable actions are available, the action should be taken. If you ask whether I think Miss Granger’s actions wise, the answer would be an unqualified ‘no.’ She acted from a position of strength that was expected to continue, but did not. If her objective was to cause Ms. Skeeter to cease publishing unfair articles, she could have conditioned her continued tolerance of Ms. Skeeter’s articles on her evaluation of their fairness. Instead she prohibited Ms. Skeeter from writing altogether, an action with no purpose except its punitive nature. If her intention was to avenge herself upon Ms. Skeeter, she succeeded, but only for a limited time. So, as with all such decisions, evaluation of the decision must be based on what the individual hoped to accomplish.”

Harry found it interesting that despite its lack of moral content, Snape’s answer was nonetheless useful. It was in a way similar to what Ginny had said a short time ago, which Snape had not seen: that Hermione’s action only made sense in the context of wanting revenge. “Thank you, Professor. That was helpful.”

Snape nodded. “Unless you have any further questions, we are finished for the time being.”



“No, nothing, Professor, thanks.”

Harry moved to leave, but Snape spoke again. “If I call you tomorrow, I shall do so at exactly ten p.m. This may assist you in scheduling your... activities.”

Harry couldn't help but smile. Very dry humor, he thought, but sometimes funny. “Thank you, Professor. I appreciate that.” He left Snape's office, Fawkes appeared, and Harry went to the Burrow.

Harry and Fawkes materialized in the living room, after which Fawkes perched on Harry's shoulder. Ron and Ginny were on the sofa talking, and Molly in a chair, knitting. Harry asked where Hermione was.

“Sleeping,” said Ron. “When we came back, I sat in her room and talked to her some more. I didn't want her to be alone with her thoughts. Fawkes came and sang, and she finally fell asleep at about five or so. We've been trying to be quiet upstairs, we want her to get as much sleep as she can get.”

“Also, because the longer she sleeps, the longer Neville has, to be ready before she sees him again,” added Ginny. “She's still going to be desperate to see him, and he may not be ready. It's hard to say.”

“That reminds me, I'd like to get there a little early, maybe ten minutes, if that's okay,” said Harry.

“No problem, but you'd better eat soon, then,” said Ginny. “There's food for you in the kitchen.”

Harry thanked Molly, and went into the kitchen. Arthur walked in, and said, “Harry, could I talk to you for a minute? Upstairs?”

Surprised, Harry nodded and headed upstairs. Arthur had never asked to talk to him privately like this before. Walking quietly so as to avoid waking Hermione, they went into Arthur and Molly's bedroom.

Arthur sat on a chair, and gestured Harry to sit on the bed. “There's something very important I need to ask you, Harry.” Harry nodded, waiting for Arthur to continue. “You remember at that dinner a few weeks ago I was talking

about Memory Charms, saying that I could recognize when one had been done. When I came home today, the first thing I noticed about Molly was that one had been done to her. A strong one, it was clear as day to me. Around the same time, Ron told me about the letters you all got. It's not hard to put two and two together. I would've asked Ron, except it was so strong I didn't think it could've been him, even if he'd been taught how to do it. So I'm asking, was it you?"

Solemnly, Harry nodded. "I assume Ron told you that the letters took information which was basically true, and twisted and distorted it so that it seemed much worse than it was?"

Arthur frowned. "Harry, I'm not questioning your motives. I know you, I'm sure you had the very best of intentions for what you did. But you need to understand that while we use Memory Charms a lot on Muggles because we have to, it takes the most extreme circumstances to justify using them on wizards and witches without their consent. The Aurors must have explained this to you when they taught it to you. It's against the law for a very good reason. If people could just do it anytime they wanted, even with excellent intentions, people's memories would be at risk, no one would be safe." Arthur paused, staring at Harry earnestly. Then he glanced down and shook his head a little. "And there you sit, Harry Potter, maybe the most courageous wizard of your generation, a phoenix on your shoulder as a living testament to your character. If anyone's earned the right not to have his judgment questioned, it's you, but I still felt it was important to say what I said. So, having said all that, I'm very curious to know what could have prompted it."

Harry had wanted to interrupt, but felt that Arthur had the right to say what he wanted to say uninterrupted. Now he said, "Arthur, the fact that I'm Harry Potter had nothing to do with why I did it. I don't feel like I have any special rights, or have earned the privilege of breaking the law. I just... very strongly felt like it was the right thing to do. Molly's been through so much pain, she didn't deserve..." Harry pulled the letter he had taken from Molly out of his robes and handed it to Arthur, staying silent for a moment as Arthur read, his eyes widening.

“After you and Molly went upstairs that night, Fred and George did ask Ginny and I what we truly felt about Percy’s death, how it affected us, but what Skeeter wrote is such an exaggeration as to not be true. The truth is, we all had ambivalent feelings about Percy, and we all felt badly about it. We didn’t feel like we really knew him, we still had anger toward him for what he had done to this family, and we were very upset for what you and Molly had to go through. We just needed to talk about our how we felt about it, and we couldn’t do that with you and Molly around.”

Arthur stared ahead, very emotional, but unexpressive. Then he looked down, and spoke. “It’s not going to surprise you, I’m sure, to hear that I shared some of your ambivalence. I loved Percy, of course, he was my son. His betrayal hurt me worse than anything ever had, and I know I bear at least some responsibility for it. In the fight that drove him away, I was honest, but unnecessarily insulting. That doesn’t excuse what he did, but... anyway, I can very well understand how you all felt. That was why what happened was so tragic.”

Harry nodded. “I think we all kind of understood that. Anyway, Molly came out of the kitchen, holding the letter, tears were starting to come to her eyes... I just couldn’t bear to think of it, that she should have to suffer this again. I just decided to do it.”

Harry was sure Arthur was trying to hold back tears; Arthur said nothing. After a pause, Harry said, “If you tell me to, Arthur, I’ll go and withdraw the charm, and hope that she forgives me for doing it.”

Arthur shook his head. “No,” he said quietly. “No, even though the principle of the law says I should take you up on it... but I love her, and like you, I would spare her the pain, especially as undeserved and spiteful as the letter is. I can’t say I would have done it myself; she’s my wife, and if spouses start doing it to one another... I do hope you’ll never do it to Ginny, no matter the reason. But this is done, and I’m not going to undo it.”

Arthur stood, and Harry did too. “Thank you, Harry, for being honest with me, though I didn’t expect anything else.” Harry felt like he wanted to say something else, but he didn’t know what. He simply nodded and left.

When Harry got down to the kitchen, he looked at a clock and saw that it was eleven twenty-five, and he wanted to get to the Aurors’ headquarters early. He ate as fast as he could, found Ginny, and they went through the fireplace.

Separating from Ginny, he headed toward the guest quarters. He knocked on the door, and after a few seconds, the door cracked open and Neville peeked through. Seeing Harry, he opened it, his face impassive. Harry walked in. He decided not to make small talk, feeling that Neville would be in no mood for it. “Neville, do you know who wrote those letters?”

He nodded. “Rita Skeeter. Cassandra told me, and she also told me that they’re pretty exaggerated, but basically true.”

“Not only exaggerated, but distorted,” Harry pointed out. “In most of the letters we got, she makes something look really bad, but leaves out the information that explains why it’s not really like that. That’s the case for yours, too. Neville, if you take what she said seriously, you’re doing exactly what this person who hates Hermione wants you to do. She’d like nothing better than to break you two up, to crush Hermione’s spirit. She deliberately sent these letters right after you’d been through that horrible experience, so you’d be vulnerable. This is the kind of person we’re talking about.”

Neville looked pained. “I understand, Harry, and maybe you’re right. But what she said in the letters... it really rang true. It’s the kind of thing Hermione would do or say. She did try to pull me away from my grandmother, she did usually act like she knew what was best for me better than I did...”

Harry jumped in while Neville was pausing. “And those are important things that you need to talk about,” he agreed. “But you can’t take anything seriously that this woman says, she’s trying to destroy Hermione. Neville, since

those letters came, Hermione's done nothing but cry, until she finally fell asleep. She's terrified that she'll lose you. You have to give her a chance."

"I will, Harry. I wasn't planning on never talking to her again, or something. I'm just... this is really difficult for me too, you know."

"I know. We all want to help you, both of you."

"It seems like you're mainly trying to help her. That's all you've talked about since you came in here."

"That's because she can help you best, Neville, if you let her. I know what happened to you is worse than what happened to me last year, but if I'd had Ginny when Sirius died, it would've helped a lot. I mean, I can tell you how sorry I am, and how much I support you, but it's not the same as if she does. She can help you better than we can, and she would be right now, if not for Skeeter. That's why I'm here telling you this. It's for her, but even more for you."

"I'm sorry, Neville. I have to go soon, my shift is starting. But I have a few minutes, and there's something I have to go and get."

Neville looked confused as Fawkes appeared. Harry and Fawkes left, and were back in fifteen seconds; Harry was holding Fawkes' tail in one hand and the Pensieve in the other. Harry shifted his memories into the Pensieve as an amazed Neville watched. "I'll be back for it later, after my shift." He headed for the door.

"Harry... is this..." Neville gaped.

Harry stopped at the door and nodded. "See you later."