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## CHAPTER 13

### GINNY'S BIRTHDAY

Realizing what day it was, Harry climbed out of bed with a little more energy than usual. It wasn't because it was Friday, though that was still his favorite day of the week, because of his seventh year Defense Against the Dark Arts class and his class with Dentus. His anticipation was because it was the twenty-eighth of September, and Ginny's sixteenth birthday. He reflected that though she was more than a year younger than the rest of the group, he didn't tend to think of her that way. She's mature for her age, thought Harry, and definitely more mature than I am. Despite all he'd been through, he still felt at times that he didn't know how to handle some aspects of his life. Thank goodness she's the one I fell in love with, he thought, not for the first time.

The curtains on Ron's bed were still drawn. Chuckling at what he was about to do, Harry conjured his dog, giving it instructions to lick Ron's face. The dog came into view, and only had to take a few steps to reach Ron's bed and jump through the curtains. Harry was soon rewarded, hearing Ron yell, "Hey!" followed in a few seconds by, "Very funny, Harry."

"I thought so," replied Harry, as Ron pulled back the curtains in annoyance.

"It's a very nice and friendly dog," said Ron sarcastically, in a T-shirt and trousers. "Now, would you please get rid of it? It's kind of hard to get my robe over my head with that licking my face all the time." The dog vanished. "And the dog may disappear, but the slobber doesn't," Ron continued complaining. "How do you get it to do that, anyway?"

Harry had no idea, but wasn't about to admit it. "Part of the energy of love, Ron."

“The energy of spit, you mean,” retorted Ron, wiping his face on his robe’s sleeve.

“Well, whatever you want to call it,” said Harry. Noting Ron’s robe, he had a sudden thought. “So, do you miss wearing the Aurors’ robes?”

Ron raised his eyebrows a little, as if wondering what had made Harry think of it. “Not especially. I mean, of course it was extra cool to wear them, but them saying it was okay was almost as good as actually wearing them. Also, my little bit of lifting a few weeks ago got me lots of attention, more than I need for a while. Quite a few first years, and a few second years, have looked at me like... I don’t know, like I was you, I guess. Kind of hard to get used to, made me understand a bit how you must feel.”

“But not enough to persuade you to stop making fun of me about it,” said Harry, his tone making it a statement rather than a question.

Ron chuckled. “Yeah, right. No, not much chance of that. Of course, there’s so much to make fun of you about, I don’t really need any one particular thing.”

“That’s what I thought,” agreed Harry. “But I didn’t mean that getting attention was the reason to wear the robes, exactly, it’s more the pride in being allowed to, like you said.”

“Morning,” said Neville, walking up to them. “Yes, I know what you mean. In the summer, sometimes I wore them just for that reason, even during the time when I couldn’t do the energy-of-love spells. It just felt good to wear them.”

They started to head out of the dormitory. “But that’s not so much a big deal for you, Neville,” said Ron. “You’re going to be one, anyway. That could have been my only chance to wear them.”

“Well, first of all, we don’t know that—”

Harry and Ron chuckled. “Yes, we do, Neville,” said Harry. “They started training you because you were the son of two Aurors, but they wouldn’t still be doing it unless they were pretty sure you’d make it.”

“Yeah, Neville, none of this being overly modest business,” Ron chided him. “That’s Harry’s thing.”

“Sorry, I forgot,” said Neville, going along with the joke. “Anyway, the other thing I was going to say was...” He paused for a few seconds. “Now I’ve forgotten it.” Harry and Ron laughed. “Give me a second, it had to do with... oh, yes, I remember. I was going to say, Ron, that it may not have been your only chance. There’s no reason you couldn’t become one if you really wanted to. I mean, if I could, you certainly could.”

“Yes, there’s a point,” said Ron, pretending to agree. “Why don’t I just go and say those exact words to Hermione, see what she thinks.”

Neville shrugged. “Well, if you really want to suffer like that...” All three laughed as they climbed through the portrait hole one by one. “You know what I mean.”

“They’d have to make the same exception for me for Potions that they’ve made for you,” pointed out Ron. “I know you said they said it’s possible, but I wouldn’t want to assume they would. Besides, after you and Harry, are they going to have any openings?”

“They will,” said Neville confidently. “Kingsley has said that they want there to be as many Aurors as there are qualified people. Apparently there have been over fifty at times before, though there are less than forty now. That’s not a problem. Combining how Harry’s taught you a lot of the stuff we’ve learned, and your experience at helping keep Harry alive, I think you’d be considered qualified.”

“Hadn’t thought of it that way, but I suppose I see your point,” conceded Ron. “It’s probably more rigorous than their training program. I’ll think about it. And if I do it, I could study Potions with you, however you end up studying it.”

“I assume they have contacts with private experts who teach people for them,” said Neville. “Private experts who are, you know, friendly people. Or at least not determined to make their students’ lives as difficult as possible.”

“Are there any Potions masters like that?” asked Ron facetiously.

“I think there are a few,” said Neville as they entered the Great Hall. Or, at least, who haven’t been Cleansed, thought Harry.

They walked to their usual spots and sat down, the girls already there. Harry reached over and took Ginny’s hand. “Happy Birthday,” he said, communicating much more with his eyes.

“Thanks,” she replied, looking happy. “You know what’s the best thing about turning sixteen?” Pansy started to speak, but Ginny cut her off. “Not you, I know you know. I want to know if they know.” Harry and Ron exchanged a blank look, while Neville smiled. “All right, Neville, what is it?”

“Only one more year until you and Harry can get legally married.”

“Yes, very good. Harry, I’m disappointed in you for not thinking of that.” Her expression made clear, however, that she was joking.

“Sorry, I thought we were already,” he teased back. “Feels like that to me, anyway.”

“Good answer,” said Pansy.

“That’s sweet of you, but it won’t really feel like we’re married until we can sleep in the same bed every night,” said Ginny wistfully. “So I guess the birthday doesn’t mean that much, just for that reason. I mean, legally, we could get married a year from today, but it wouldn’t do us much good.”

“I don’t know, I kind of like the idea that we got married as soon as we possibly could,” said Harry. “Probably not many people get married on their seventeenth birthday.”

“Oh, some do, Harry,” said Hermione, putting down the Prophet for a moment. “Not so many nowadays, but it used to be fairly common. Of course, that was in the days of arranged marriages. But still now, it does happen. I read about it in one of the books I looked at when I was helping you research the Joining of Hands.”

Ron looked amused. “I guess we all know by now that if Hermione picks up a book, she has to read the whole thing.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” she retorted. “By the way, Harry, there’s something that might interest you in today’s Prophet. There’s an editorial about the subject of keeping Death Eaters locked up, or the difficulty in doing so. You remember we discussed this subject a bit before Christmas last year. Since more have escaped since then, especially the thirteen on the night the magic went out, the editorial questions the ability of the Ministry to hold onto them. It suggests that stronger measures might be necessary; that’s been talked about a lot before. But it hints... listen: ‘If such efforts still prove unequal to the task, if Death Eaters still manage to escape despite our best efforts to hold them, we must face the fact that extreme measures may be called for.’ Do you see what they’re trying to say?”

“The Imperius Curse?” asked Harry.

“No, that was discussed last year,” she reminded him. “That’s one of the ‘stronger measures’ they’re considering now.”

Neville spoke solemnly. “It refers to killing them.”

The others all looked startled, as Hermione nodded. “Is that something they might actually do?” asked Ron. “Who wrote the editorial, anyway?”

“We don’t know, the editorials are unsigned,” explained Hermione. “Professor Dentus has told me that Ministry people sometimes use Prophet editorials to float ideas anonymously, get a reaction to them, start a debate. This one will definitely get a reaction, at least from people who read between the lines. As for your first question, it sounds unlikely. It would be a pretty radical idea, which is why it’s couched in such vague language. There hasn’t been an official death penalty for quite a few years. I mean, letting Aurors kill people in the line of duty is one thing, but the state committing the equivalent of cold-blooded murder is really another.

“Also, it’s kind of problematical, image-wise. The Muggle government of Britain doesn’t have the death penalty, and most, I think maybe all, European Muggle governments don’t either. The Americans do, but the Europeans kind of look down on them for it, like they’re uncivilized. Now, it’s not that the wizarding community is going to worry about what European Muggles think, since they don’t

know about the magical world anyway, but it's just the idea that it looks that bad. Not to mention that it's like an admission of defeat, that we're so incompetent at keeping people locked up that we have to resort to this. It's really unlikely that this'll happen. I'll have to check in with Professor Dentus, maybe ask him in History of Magic today."

Ginny shook her head. "I'm all for strong action, but I think even I'd draw the line at this. I think it's safe to say, Harry, that you couldn't imagine supporting this."

"More like, I'd speak out against it," agreed Harry. "If we do that, are we really any better than they are? Well, okay, we are, but you know what I mean."

"Bit of a difference between killing killers and killing innocent people," pointed out Ron. "But of course, I understand the point, that it's just wrong. I couldn't disagree. I wonder how other countries' wizards keep them locked up."

"Other countries' wizards don't have to deal with Voldemort trying to free their magical convicts all the time," pointed out Hermione.

"I can see the reason for suggesting it, of course," said Neville thoughtfully. "You kill them, and they can't be broken out and then kill other people anymore. And anyone who's a Death Eater is a killer, that's just a given." Harry's thoughts flashed to Snape. "Of course I'd oppose this too, I'd hate to think we'd stoop that low. We just have to do better at holding onto them."

"How does Voldemort find out where they're being kept, anyway?" asked Ron. "I know you said that thing about him finding people and raiding their memories, but I thought only the Aurors knew about Malfoy, Lestrangle, and the others they're holding, but Voldemort found out and tried to rescue them."

"Apparently a few people in the Ministry knew that the Aurors were holding people, just not who," said Harry. "Kingsley's told Neville and I that since then, they've moved the people they're holding and keeping the location very tightly held, even most of the Aurors themselves don't know. He implied, but didn't say, that

they did Memory Charms on the few Ministry people that did know, to make sure that they didn't tell anyone."

"Which is illegal," pointed out Hermione, "but Aurors seem to be exempt from laws like that. Well, we shouldn't worry about it anyway, it's just a hint from an editorial. We should think about other things, like Ginny being sixteen today. I'm sorry, Ginny, that we couldn't get for you the gift we know you'd most want."

Grinning, Ginny replied, "You mean, to be in a room alone with Harry?"

"I couldn't think of much you'd want more than that," said Hermione. "I actually considered asking all the Gryffindors to stay out of Gryffindor Tower between six and seven tonight, and changing the password for that time. Everybody would have had to agree, which they probably would have, and it wouldn't have been against the school rules. But the problem was that the whole school would have known, and Harry would have been mortified at everyone knowing."

Ginny feigned puzzlement. "And you let that stop you because...?" The others, except Harry, laughed as she continued, "I mean, it's my birthday, after all, not his. I should get what I want."

"I'm sorry, Ginny," said Harry, half-serious. "I know you'd want me to have Fawkes take us to my quarters—"

She waved him off. "No, I know how you feel about that, and you're right, much as I hate to admit it. We can't just go and decide the rules don't apply to us just because you're a teacher. But boy, I hate being noble about this kind of thing."

"I can understand that," agreed Hermione. "I've heard that the lack of privacy is a common complaint especially of seventh years, who by this age are often in serious relationships." With a sympathetic look, she added, "I guess it's best to fall in love right before you graduate."

"I wouldn't change a thing," said Ginny, squeezing Harry's hand.

He squeezed back, then let go so he could continue his breakfast. "So, Neville, how's it going with Blaise?"

Neville shrugged. “Well, you can see in class, he’s getting a little better, at least.”

“Sorry, I kind of meant, how you’re getting along, his personality.”

“That’s a harder question,” mused Neville. “He’s pretty quiet, obviously. When he talks, it’s mainly because he has to. I’ve tried asking him a few casual questions about things, and he mostly gives one-word answers. I think it’s just going to take time for him to get comfortable talking to people, if he ever does. I mean, it took me some time, and I had much better circumstances than him.”

Harry nodded. “I guess that’s not surprising. Obviously, I wanted you to help him because he needs it, but I suppose I was also hoping that it would bring him out a bit.”

“It still may, it just might take more time,” said Neville.

The owls flew into the Hall, and dropped their mail, as usual. Five pieces of mail dropped in front of Ginny, which was not usual. “Wow, five, that’s more than usual even for my birthday. One’ll be from Mum, of course, but I wonder about the other four,” she said as she opened one. “Ah, this one is the same as you got, Hermione, signed by all the Aurors. That was nice of them. Here’s Mum’s, and these two...” She opened one envelope, then another, and reported, “These are from people I don’t even know! Wow, my first fan mail!”

The others laughed at the idea that she would be excited about it, though they knew she was exaggerating for effect. “Won’t be your last, I have a feeling,” said Harry.

“I’ll have to write back to them and say ‘thank you,’” she said with raised eyebrows at Harry, who disliked doing that kind of thing. As she opened the fifth one, she glanced at the return address, and her eyes went wide. “This is from Dudley!”

The others were equally surprised. “Why would he...” wondered Harry, who then added, “And how did he know it was your birthday?”



“Mum,” suggested Ron. “Either that, or that Internet thing. I think those pages about us had our birthdays.”

“Probably the Internet,” put in Hermione. “Remember, I got a few cards from people I didn’t know as well. That must have been where these two got Ginny’s birthday.”

Ginny opened the card, took out what Harry could tell from the back was a picture, and looked at it in puzzlement. “It’s just a picture of him, sitting on... Oh,” she added as she started laughing. She looked up at Harry and said, “It’s a little joke. He’s wearing steel-toed shoes.”

Now Harry chuckled as well, and explained the reference to the others. “Wonder if he bought them, or just borrowed them from a friend or something. It is funny, but at the same time, I don’t fancy the idea of him owning steel-toed shoes. You know he’s been the leader of a gang that bullies people, I’d hate to think he’d get tempted to use them on someone other than Malfoy.”

“He may be growing out of that, Harry,” suggested Hermione hopefully. “People can be like that when they’re teenagers, but grow up, and realize it’s not something they should be doing.”

“She’s right, I should know,” added Pansy solemnly. “And he didn’t seem bad at all when I met him.”

“I hope so,” said Harry. He wondered whether Hermione had been obliquely referring to his father, which only she and Ginny knew about. “It was nice of him, anyway. I wonder if it’s partly because you’re now more like a family member to him, since he knows we’ll be married in the future.”

“One interesting aspect of that, Harry,” pointed out Hermione, “is that it means he thinks of you as a family member.”

He chuckled. “I hadn’t thought of it that way, but it makes sense. I guess he has changed, at least in that way.”

After lunch, Harry went to the staff room, as usual. As he sat, John asked him to wish Ginny a happy birthday for him. Harry said he would, then wondered, “How did you happen to know it was her birthday, anyway?”

“I like to know when it’s everybody’s birthday who takes my class,” John explained. “I asked the school to put it on my roll sheets so I can mention it to students whose birthday it is, or is coming up, but won’t fall on a day they have my class. It’s nice, because it lets their friends know, who may not have otherwise.”

Harry nodded, impressed. “That’s a good idea. Too bad we can’t have parties, but we’d be having one a day if we did it for everybody.”

“How’s it going with your classes?” asked Sprout.

“I assume you mean, the energy-of-love parts,” clarified Harry. “It’s way too early to tell, really. We probably won’t start to know anything for a few months at least, more like half a year is more likely.”

“I asked because I’ve heard that in Hufflepuff, a few ‘study groups’ have started,” explained Sprout. “I think a group of fifth-year girls started one, and another one was started by third-year girls. They’re letting the boys join them, or at least those who seem to take it seriously.”

“I haven’t seen anyone not taking it seriously,” said Harry. “Maybe not everyone does, but there hasn’t been any smirking or joking. You know how it would normally be for people this age, they’d be making all kinds of jokes. But in each class’s first lesson, I asked them not to, and I told them it would be much less likely to work if they did. They seem to be taking what I said seriously.”

“Well, you are the expert,” Sprout half-joked. “People wouldn’t be trying to do this in their free time if they weren’t serious about it, so I’m not surprised that they’re doing what you tell them. It’ll be interesting to see how it works.”

“Oh, Harry,” said Dentus, “I don’t know if Hermione saw the editorial in—”

“She saw it, and understood what they were talking about. She said she might ask you about it in class.”

Dentus nodded. "I could easily do several classes just on the history of capital punishment. I mentioned it because it seems like the kind of thing you'd have a strong opinion about."

"I'd think most people would," said Harry.

"Yes, but maybe not the one you'd think," said Dentus. "Especially at a time like this, that kind of thing has a certain appeal. As Bright said to you, you tend to operate on a rather strong sense of what's right and wrong. You may find that for many people at least, that can be flexible, depending on the situation. It may turn out that you are one of those people, and there would be nothing wrong if you were. Albus wasn't flexible about this kind of thing, as you know; we both think he disapproved of the ARA despite the obvious advantages because he felt it could lead to abuse. In other words, that it was wrong for the government to take away people's liberties in any way. If it was wrong, it was wrong, and that was that. Now, capital punishment seems like, and is, a very different issue, but as the situation becomes more dire, more and more people may be open to it. Whoever is responsible for the editorial is anticipating a time when people will be open to it, and softening the ground for it."

Harry shook his head. "I obviously can be a little flexible, since I wasn't ready to risk my friends over principle last year. But I know I can't be this flexible. We just have to do a better job of keeping them locked up. I'd do something to help if I could."

"Ah, but there's the problem," pointed out Dentus. "You're far too valuable to use like that, even if you didn't have responsibilities at Hogwarts. That's why the Aurors don't want to guard prisoners, and they have an excellent point." As Dentus spoke, Harry realized that he was one of the very few who knew that the Aurors did in fact guard some prisoners. "It's just a waste of their talent to use them for that, except when someone manages to break a dozen out. And if they use ordinary wizards, even well-trained ones, there's a much greater risk that an assault can get them out. Part of the problem is that no one really wants to guard prisoners. It's an

incredibly boring job, not to mention dangerous and highly stressful. It's not going to attract the best possible people, to put it mildly."

Harry pondered this for a minute. "If I pushed Bright to devote more resources to the problem, do you think he'd do it?"

"Honestly, Harry, I don't know. Strictly from a political point of view, this is always a hard thing to get politicians to do. They'd always rather spend resources where it'll get them the most political support, and things like that are way down on their list. But it is a security issue, and that has a lot of resonance right now. It partly depends on whether you pushed him publicly or privately. He wouldn't mind if you did it publicly, provided you gave him advance notice so he could be ready."

"But wouldn't that just give him a better opportunity to obstruct what Harry wants, if that's what he's inclined to do?" wondered Sprout.

"If he's inclined to obstruct Harry, there's little chance Harry would succeed anyway, for something like this," responded Dentus. "But to answer your question, it's a question of what kind of relationship Harry wants to have with him. Letting him know is a kind of political courtesy, and Bright would respond with the courtesy of letting Harry know his intentions. If you want to have a working relationship, there are rules, and these are some of them. But also, Harry, you're going to want to talk to Kingsley about this, find out where the Aurors stand. They could be more flexible than you, and you're probably not going to want to get out too far ahead of them, at least publicly."

"I can't imagine they'd approve of this," said Harry.

"Probably not, but at least you're going to want to find out, make sure."

Harry sighed. "Yes, I suppose that's a good idea. It's just that... well, never mind, you know what I'm going to say anyway."

Dentus nodded sympathetically. "Yes, you don't like the idea of having to have meetings with people you like to work out political strategy, or your response to an issue. The problem is, of course, that that's the price of influence. You could

just stay out of it, but then you couldn't affect what happens, and something you don't like might happen."

"I guess... tell me, Archibald, what do you think Albus would have done in this situation?"

"You could always ask him," said Dentus humorously, "but I'm pretty sure I know. If asked, he'd have just said publicly what he thought, and not concerned himself with whatever result it had. As a result of that, of course, his influence was less than it could have been. One could even argue that if he had hoarded his influence and worked more within the system than outside of it, more people would have taken him seriously when he said that Voldemort was back. The rest of the Ministry wouldn't have been so quick to attack him, even if Fudge was. Albus consistently stood on principle, though, even when it would have served him better over the long term to be a bit flexible on things that weren't so important. Maybe he just felt that once you got caught up in compromising, there was no end to it. I don't know, maybe you should ask him."

"I'm pretty sure he's way past caring about politics now, but he'll answer my questions about why he did stuff, what he was thinking. I probably will ask him, thanks."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know what he says," added Dentus. Harry assured him that he would.

"Okay, that's good," said Harry to his seventh year class an hour later, having nearly finished the part of the class devoted to the energy of love. "The last thing I want to talk about before we move on today is hugging. The impression I got when I was developing this was that hugging was very helpful. Of course, I got hugged out of the Cruciatus Curse every morning while it happened, but even besides that, I was hugged during that time by Hermione, Ginny, Pansy, and Professor Dumbledore. And I also hugged Professor McGonagall." To his amusement, there were impressed and astonished looks from most of the class.

“How did that happen?” asked an amazed Parvati.

“I don’t think she wants me relating the details,” Harry replied. “It was only very reluctantly that she allowed me to tell you this at all.”

“That, I believe,” said Dean. “How did she react when you did? I have this mental image of her slapping you...” Most students laughed.

Smiling, Harry said, “She was kind of taken aback, but after a second, she hugged me back. I’m sure she would want me to tell you, though, that the circumstances were extremely unusual, and nobody should get the idea that they can walk up to her and hug her.”

“I don’t think she has anything to worry about,” cracked Seamus.

“Anyway, getting back to what I was saying, I really think it helped. I feel like... I don’t know if I can put it into words well, but it encourages the feeling that we’re trying to work towards here. But a word of caution, you should only do it if you feel comfortable. I don’t want people hugging people because they feel like they should. It has to be because you want to. Now, if you have affection for the person but just feel embarrassed about hugging, then I would suggest you do it anyway, if you can overcome your embarrassment. If you don’t feel like you can, don’t worry about it, just give it some time. Anyway, if anyone would like to hug someone to get used to the idea, I’d be happy to hug anyone who would like one.”

There was some nervous laughing. “This has to be the strangest in-class activity ever at Hogwarts,” said Seamus.

“It may not be, by the time the year is over,” responded Harry, drawing a few chuckles. Hannah stood, saying, “I’ll take one.” Harry smiled as he walked over to hug her tightly. As he did, Susan asked, “Ginny has approved of all this?”

Harry responded, “She said she was fine with anything that didn’t involve kissing on the lips.” He let go of Hannah, who smiled at him and sat.

To Harry’s surprise, Mandy stood. She met him halfway for her hug; as she returned to her seat, Ernie said, “So, this is mainly for the female students, right?”

“Stand up, Ernie, and you’ll find out,” responded Harry, to laughter. Ernie blushed and remained in his seat. “No, anyone is welcome. I can understand why the guys would be reluctant, though. It’s a bit hard to get used to, and I don’t expect everyone to—” He interrupted himself as Justin stood up. “Justin! Great, it’s good to have a male volunteer.”

He walked over and hugged Justin, who said, “I know you said not to make jokes, but it’s kind of difficult right now.”

Harry chuckled as he let go of Justin. “I know how you feel; in the first Charms class, Neville and I were making all kinds of jokes about holding hands. Now, I don’t expect everyone to run around hugging everyone, and that might be taking it too far anyway. It should be someone you at least like, not just someone you barely know as a class exercise. The main point is, it’s a good thing to get in the habit of doing, as far as helping getting the energy of love going. And the offer stands, even if we’re not in class.

“Okay, now we’re going to resume working on dueling. First of all, I want to demonstrate a few things. Neville, would you come up here, please?” Neville stood and walked toward Harry, but instead of stopping at the normal dueling distance, he continued approaching Harry. He wrapped Harry in a hug, to loud laughter from the class. Laughing, Harry hugged Neville back, and said, “That’s fine too, Neville, but I wanted to demonstrate dueling,” as Neville released him.

“Oh, *dueling*,” said Neville innocently. “Sorry, I must not have been paying attention for a minute.”

“Actually, that could be a nice dueling custom,” joked Harry. “We hug before we duel. Anyway, everyone watch carefully what happens at the end of the duel.” They did their demonstration, and Neville sat back down with Harry’s other friends on the right side of the room, from Harry’s perspective.

“Now, as you saw, I—ow!” Harry exclaimed as he felt a sharp pain in his neck. “What was that?” he asked no one in particular as he looked around. He suddenly saw what looked like a small swarm of insects, perhaps wasps, on his left

heading towards him; they seemed to be moving incredibly fast. Reflexively, he moved to his right, away from them, but they were almost on top of him. He suddenly felt very weak, and started to topple over. As he did, he saw Hermione reach for her neck...

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Hermione moved the toggle on the small device around her neck, the one that she had taken from Voldemort in June. From her seat three rows back, the pocket of time extended to the front row of students, but not to Harry. "Thank goodness," she breathed. "I was afraid he'd be caught in this as well, and it wouldn't do any good."

Half of the class was caught in the pocket; the other half seemed frozen at their desks, like statues. Harry was frozen, in mid-fall. Hermione could hear startled exclamations of "What's going on?" from a few people.

"Listen to me," announced Hermione in a loud voice as she stood. "I just used a device Harry and I took from Voldemort when we faced him in June. It stops time everywhere except within a certain distance of the device. Harry's life is under threat. He's already been bitten, or stung, by whatever those things are. The fact that there's so many of them, and they all seem to be after him, can't be a coincidence. This is an attempt on his life, and so those things are probably deadly. We have to figure out what to do, and quickly."

Hermione ignored the startled gasps as Ron turned in his seat toward her. "Voldemort said that lasted two hours, right?"

"Yes, but I don't want to bet Harry's life on him being right. We have to act as if every second counts, that this could stop at any time. First, we need to figure out exactly what these things are. Can anyone get a good look?"

Justin turned in his seat at the front of the class. "They look like wasps, but not any kind I've seen before. They have this greenish tint to them. They also



moved really fast, but in a strange way. I don't know how to explain it, it just seemed... unnatural."

"I wish I could get closer, for a better look," said Hermione, frustrated, "but if I do, the field will move with me and activate all the wasps, not to mention Harry if I'm not careful."

"Couldn't you leave the device at the desk, move forward without it?" asked Ron.

She shook her head. "We don't know anything about how the device works. For all I know, it could require the person to be wearing it, and time could start again if I took it off. I can't risk that." She paused for a second, thinking. "I'm going to have to move to the center of the room, and then forward very slowly, until one of the wasps comes within the field. Then we have to capture it, so we can figure out exactly what it is."

"Wait a minute," protested Padma. "You're going to let a deadly wasp come at us? Does anyone else see the flaw in this plan?"

"We need one!" Hermione almost shouted. "The rest of you, stay back. Ron, Pansy, Neville and I will stay here. If it attacks anyone, it'll be one of us."

"We don't know that," countered Padma. "Justin said it moved really fast. It could be on any of us before we know it."

"All right, then," said Hermione, getting angry despite the presence of Flora on her shoulder. "Everyone who doesn't want to be around for this, move to the back of the field. Then I'll move back, you move back with me, and I'll move forward again. You'll be out of the field, frozen in time, and at no risk from what I'm about to do."

Hesitation appeared on a few faces, but no one moved. Abashed, Padma said, "Look, Hermione, it's not like we're all a bunch of cowards just because we're not Gryffindors. I just wanted to be sure you understood the risk to everyone of what you're going to do."

Hermione nodded. "Believe me, I do. There's just no other choice. Harry's the one who's going to defeat Voldemort, he can't die. But the rest of you should get behind the four of us anyway, I'd rather we had a clear field of vision."

"The three of us," corrected Ron. "We need to be in front of you, Hermione. You can't be risked right now, you're the one with the thing around your neck. If you go down, we could lose the field, and Harry."

She thought for a second. "All right, much as I hate to admit it, you're right. Whoever sees it should do the Full-Body Bind on it, no reason it shouldn't work on an insect." Ron, Neville, and Pansy stepped in front of Hermione, who then slowly moved to her right; Justin and Padma moved chairs out of her way, and explained what was happening to the startled students Hermione was activating as she moved. "Neville, how far forward do I have to go to activate the nearest one?"

Neville took a few steps forward. "Hard to say for sure, since we can't see the border of the effect, but I think about six inches should be safe, so you wouldn't activate Harry or any other insects. Just go forward at about an inch a second, very slowly." He stepped back, resuming his place between Ron and Pansy.

"Okay, I'm going to start moving. Be ready." The other three affirmed their readiness, and Hermione started forward ever so slowly. After she had moved forward four inches, suddenly there was movement. One of the wasps moved toward them, then seemingly instantaneously, was almost on top of Neville, an inch from his face. Ron and Pansy's wands flashed within less than a second of each other, Ron's first. The wasp went still and fell to the floor, after which Neville's arms went to his sides and his legs came together. He started to topple forward as Pansy caught him.

"Oh, Neville!" she cried. "Oh, no..."

Being careful not to move, Hermione waved her wand, and Neville returned to normal. Off balance from having been about to fall forward, he reflexively grabbed Pansy's shoulders. "Neville, I'm so sorry," said Pansy, holding his shoulders and steadying him.

“Ah, yes, I hadn’t forgotten what that’s like,” said Neville wryly. “Thankfully, it was for a much shorter time, this time. Don’t worry about it, Pansy. I could see it was really close to me, it would be easy to miss.”

As Pansy let go of Neville, Hermione handed Ron a tissue. “Pick it up, as carefully as you can.” With slightly raised eyebrows, he took the tissue, then pointed his wand at the wasp on the floor; it rose up to Ron’s eye level, and he let it fall onto the tissue. “Or, you could do that,” Hermione said, annoyed that she hadn’t thought of it.

“It really is green, isn’t it,” remarked Ron. “I’ve never seen that before, either.”

“All right, we have to know what we’re dealing with,” said Hermione. “The next step is to go to the library and do some research, as fast as we possibly can. Let’s see…” She looked around the room. “Mandy, Anthony, I want you to come with me.”

“Why them?” asked Ron, seemingly hoping to have gone with her.

“Time is critical, Ron,” she replied. “We need to find out about this as fast as possible. We could take him to St. Mungo’s and hope they know what this is, but I won’t take that chance. I need people who can look through unfamiliar books and find information very quickly. But before we go, everyone but Ron, Pansy, and Neville should leave, in case the device fails and time starts again unexpectedly. Everyone stay around me, I’ll move closer to the door and gather in the people frozen now, though there’ll be no time to explain it to them, we just have to move them out, tell them it’s urgent. Mandy, Anthony, stay with the others for a second.”

After Hermione finished evacuating the class, she came back in, activating the five remaining students. “Weird sensation,” commented Ron. “It’s like everybody just disappeared.”

“Okay,” said Hermione. “You three… if time starts again while I’m gone, which I pray it won’t, react as fast as you can, grab him, summon Fawkes, and get him to St. Mungo’s. Ron, you’re the strongest, you should be the one to actually

grab him. If everything goes all right, I'll be back in what'll be an instant to you, with a better idea of what to do. After we finish, I'll take Mandy and Anthony to McGonagall's office, they can tell her what happened when time starts again. I'll be right back."

Mandy and Anthony held onto Hermione, who grabbed Flora's tail and was off. Sure enough, to the others' eyes an instant later, Hermione was back, now with Ginny in tow. Ginny looked at Harry's frozen form with obvious dread.

Hermione filled Ginny in on what had happened until she had gone to the library, then continued for the others' benefit as well, speaking briskly. "Fortunately, we found it in the library pretty quickly, less than five minutes. It's a rare type of insect that's the result of violations of the Ban on Experimental Breeding: a wasp that has a few very nasty qualities. One is that not only does it fly, but it also teleports very short distances, like a few feet. Enough to get from room to room, which is why they got in here without the door being open, and that's why they seemed so fast. Also, and this is what they were bred for, if they get a whiff of someone's blood they go for that person, to the exclusion of others. That's why they were all going for Harry, they were primed to home in on him. How they managed to smell his blood is something we'll have to worry about later.

"The worst part is that it's fatal, at least so far as is known. The books we saw related cases where a person got exposed to this kind of venom and survived, but only because they got medical care instantly, and blood transfusions from a brother or close relative with the same blood type. Family connections usually don't matter when it comes to blood in this way, but for some reason, it matters with this. Now, the problem is, Harry obviously doesn't have anyone like that, so we need the person most closely connected to him by blood and who has the same blood type. And that would be..." She trailed off unhappily.

"His Aunt Petunia," groaned Ron. "Peachy. She'll be thrilled."

"And that's assuming she's the same type as him, which isn't so likely," said Hermione. "After that is Dudley, who would do it, but it wouldn't be as good as his

mother, since his blood connection to Harry is only half of hers. But we need to try to get her, if her blood type is the same.”

“Is that something we can find out?” asked Pansy. “And how will we know hers?”

“I found out his, it’s type A. After I took Anthony and Mandy to McGonagall I went to the infirmary, and had Madam Pomfrey look it up. As for hers, I’ll have to ask her.

“The other part of this plan is that as soon as time resumes, we get Fawkes to where Harry is, and he’ll drop a tear or two onto where Harry got stung. That should help, even for something that’s normally deadly. I’m praying that the combination of that and a fast blood transfusion will do it. Once time resumes, Harry will have very little time. Normally, he wouldn’t have a chance at this point. Before we go, though, we have to get him to St. Mungo’s. I’ll get just close enough to him to activate him, then Flora will take us there. I’ll get away from him fast, find a Healer, and explain it to them. Then I’ll come back here.” Flora took flight, ready to go. “Ron, Neville, grab Harry and throw him onto me. I’ll be back in a flash.”

They did, and she was. “They have him, and two Healers are there and know what to do. They’ll be ready as fast as they can for whoever we bring. Hold on, Ginny. Next stop, Privet Drive.”

“We’re all going,” countered Ron.

“No,” said Hermione urgently. “Ron, Petunia’s going to react very badly to this. The more people ‘invade’ her home, the worse she’ll react, we have to do this with the minimum number of people. Me, because I’m wearing this, and Ginny because...” Hermione paused, clearly trying to hold back potential tears, “... because Petunia needs to see the face of the person who’ll be hurt the worst if Harry dies.”

Ginny nodded somberly. “I’m ready.”

Hermione turned to her. “Whatever you do, don’t yell, don’t argue, no matter what awful things she says about us or Harry. She’s not going to like this, we need to persuade her.”

Ginny nodded again. “I understand.”

“Okay, where do you three want to be when time starts again? I should get you there now, wherever that is.”

“We should stay here,” offered Ron. “Get rid of the rest of these.” Neville and Pansy nodded in agreement.

“That’s awfully risky,” pointed out Hermione. “Just because they were looking for Harry doesn’t mean they won’t sting anyone else once he’s gone. We didn’t find that information in the books, we stopped reading when we got what we wanted.”

“And if we’re not here, what’s going to happen?” asked Neville. “They’re just going to spread though the school, randomly stinging people. Dozens could be killed. If things go right and that thing lasts long enough, after Harry’s set up, you can go to the Ministry and get some people here who’re experienced in this kind of thing. We can probably take out all of them, but... I admit I don’t like it, but it’s better than the alternative. We’d just better hope that thing lasts long enough.”

With obvious and deep reluctance, Hermione nodded. “Okay, get ready. If all goes well, the next thing you’ll see is me with people experienced with dealing with dangerous insects. Ginny, let’s go.” Ginny held onto Hermione, who grabbed Flora’s tail.

They were immediately transported to the living room of four Privet Drive. They looked around as Flora settled on Hermione’s shoulder, and they saw that Petunia was in the kitchen, apparently putting something away, frozen. Hermione took Ginny’s hand and slowly approached Petunia until she activated, her back to Hermione and Ginny. “Mrs. Dursley?” said Hermione in a normal tone of voice.

Petunia shrieked and turned to face them, startled. “Who are you? What are you...” She trailed off as she apparently recognized them.

Partly to be polite, Hermione answered her question anyway. “I’m Hermione Granger, one of Harry’s group. This is Ginny Weasley, she’s his... the one he’s going to marry. If he—”

“And you come barging into my home like this? You people don’t know about knocking on doors?” Anger was taking the place of fright on Petunia’s face.

“Yes, Mrs. Dursley, I was raised in a normal home, my parents are dentists. I thought you wouldn’t want the neighbors seeing people dressed like us knocking at your door, and we didn’t have time to change. We’re in an urgent, desperate situation, and we need your help. Harry’s been stung by something and is close to death. He will die unless he gets a blood transfusion, from as close a living relative as possible, and that’s you.”

Petunia looked bewildered, as though she hadn’t understood what Hermione had said. “Stung? Doesn’t he know enough to stay away from bees? And that’s not deadly, anyway.”

Trying very hard to be patient, Hermione replied, “It was a magical wasp, Mrs. Dursley, and they were after him. It’s another attempt on his life by Voldemort.”

“And he wants my help? After what he said in that article? He hates us so much, I’m surprised he wouldn’t rather die than ask for my help.”

“*He* might,” said Ginny intensely. “*We’re* the ones who are asking, partly because he can’t, and partly because he’s far more important to us than he is to himself. You know he didn’t talk to that reporter, you know he didn’t want the article written. Are you really going to let him die when you could prevent it because he said things to friends that upset you?”

“You try raising someone for fifteen years and then having them turn on you like that!” yelled Petunia.

“I’ll never raise a child in a cupboard, I know that much!” responded Ginny at equal volume and greater intensity. “I’ll never raise a child to make them feel like they’re no good, to never be loved or cared for...” Feeling tears coming on, Ginny

turned around and took deep breaths, obviously making a supreme effort to keep her emotions in check.

“Mrs. Dursley,” said Hermione quietly, “we just don’t have time to argue about that article, or Harry’s childhood. You know how important he is to us, not to mention the entire wizarding community. But even if he wasn’t, he’s still a person. You may have the power to help save his life, and there’s no risk to you whatsoever. The only reason not to do it would be that you’re completely indifferent to whether he lives or dies.”

“No, that’s not right,” said Ginny to Hermione. Still intense, she looked at Petunia. “Even if you’re indifferent, you’d still do it, because he’s a human being whose life is in danger. If you don’t do it, it means that you’d prefer him dead than alive.”

Petunia looked back at them angrily; what they were saying was apparently starting to sink in. “Is that what you think? Is that what he thinks, what he’s told you?”

“He thinks you’d prefer never to see him again,” said Hermione levelly. “I don’t think he thinks that you’d prefer him dead. As for us, we don’t think any particular thing. All I know is, you know it’s urgent, you know his life is in danger, and you’re still arguing with us. Most people would have said ‘okay, let’s go’ by now. So, I don’t know.”

Petunia stared at Hermione. “It would never occur to you...” She stopped herself in mid-sentence, then said, “Never mind. You said I ‘may’ be able to save his life. Why ‘may?’”

“It’ll only work if you have the same blood type as he does,” said Hermione. “What is your blood type, Mrs. Dursley?”

“You obviously assume that I don’t know his blood type; it may surprise you to know that I took enough of an interest in his welfare to know that. We have the same type.”



Hermione stared at Petunia, eyebrows raised slightly with an expression of ‘well, then?’ Petunia sighed. “How do we get there?”

“I’ll Apparate you. Ginny, you take Flora, and I’ll Disapparate us as soon as you’re gone. She knows where to go, you probably won’t notice any time missing.”

“What do you mean, any time missing?” asked a puzzled Petunia, as Ginny reached for Flora’s tail.

“I’ll explain when we—” started Hermione.

“—get there,” she finished, hands on Petunia’s shoulders, in the emergency care area of St. Mungo’s. She had been careful to Apparate far enough from Harry that he wouldn’t be brought into time again. Petunia gasped at the change in scenery.

“Here she is,” said Hermione to a Healer who she activated by walking near her, Ginny right behind, Flora re-settling on her shoulder.

The Healer walked over to Petunia, took her arm, and started to gently steer her away. “This way, ma’am,” she said. With a suspicious look, Petunia allowed herself to be guided away.

Hermione followed them to make sure they stayed within the device’s influence. The Healer asked Petunia to lie on a padded table, and she did, asking, “Why isn’t anyone moving?” Hermione took a minute to explain it as they started taking Petunia’s blood; Petunia just shook her head, as if thinking that she shouldn’t be surprised by anything she was told by these people.

“Are you going to go to the Ministry, get the people to deal with the insects back at Hogwarts?” asked Ginny.

Somber, Hermione shook her head. “This thing might have only two minutes left on it, for all I know. Until Harry has to be activated to receive the blood, he’s going to get whatever few minutes this has left. After that, I’ll go do that.”

Ginny walked to the other side of the table, the direction in which Petunia’s head was turned. Trying to hold back emotion, she said, “Mrs. Dursley, this is how

important Harry is, to all of us. The person she wants to marry, and two of her best friends, are back at Hogwarts in the same room with a few dozen of those wasps. If that device stops working, their lives are at serious risk. She could get them help, but she won't until everything's been done for Harry that can be."

"I'm sure he'll be pleased," said Petunia, a bit sullenly.

Ginny shook her head sadly. "You really don't know him, do you. He'll be really angry. If he were able, he'd be demanding that she go help them, even though it increased the risk that he'd die. He faces danger every day, Mrs. Dursley, danger that something like this will happen, because he refuses to back down from Voldemort. He could keep his head down, and Voldemort would leave him alone. But he won't, because it's the right thing to do.

"And speaking of which," added Ginny, now on a roll and with a captive audience, "The things he said in that last article, about the childhood article... I'm sure you know he was speaking directly to you, and it wasn't to try to get on your good side. He has no hope that that'll ever happen. He can't let himself hope for it, because when he has—"

"I know," Petunia interrupted, expressionless. "Dudley told me he said that."

"Oh," said Ginny, obviously surprised, and obviously taking Petunia's failure to contradict the statement as an implicit acknowledgment of its truth. "Well, he just felt that the article made you and your husband look worse than you deserved to, so he said what he said. He just thought it was the right thing to do. If you think it was easy for him to do that, you're wrong. But he doesn't hate you. He just has... issues. I would think you could understand why." Ginny paused. "I wish you could know him like we do. I don't know if you ever can, because so much has happened. But I wish you could." She turned and walked to the foot of the bed, her head down.

Hermione approached Ginny from behind, and put a hand on her shoulder. "It'll be all right, Ginny. It'll work."

Ginny turned and hugged Hermione, clinging to her. “Sometimes I feel like I just can’t deal with this. It’s so stressful, I feel like I want to just walk out of that thing’s range and be frozen in time, and find out what happened when we know. And I feel bad for feeling that way, because he’s the one it’s happening to, not me.”

Hermione patted her back reassuringly. “It’s harder on us than him, because we worry about him more than he does. It’s hardest on you, obviously. You shouldn’t feel bad. Can you imagine how he’d be reacting if someone was trying to kill you once a month? He’d be beside himself, he’d go crazy. You do very well, considering what you have to deal with. You have nothing to feel bad about.”

Ginny dissolved in tears, sobbing into Hermione’s shoulder. Hermione just held her. As Ginny’s tears were winding down, she said, “I just have this blind faith that he’ll always live, because he always does. And probably because I’d go crazy if I let myself think anything different.”

Nodding, Hermione took one hand away to find tissues in her robes while holding Ginny with the other. Producing a packet, she offered it to Ginny, who chuckled and took it. “I can always count on you for that.” She looked at Hermione gratefully, and added, “And for lots of other stuff, including saving his life.” Ginny withdrew from the hug to blow her nose.

With a small smile, Hermione replied, “Like Ron said in August, you spend enough time around Harry, you’re bound to end up saving his life sooner or later.” She shook her head. “What a thing to make jokes about. But at the same time, it’s almost true. And who would know better than us.”

The Healer, who had been pretending she hadn’t been listening but obviously had, announced that she had all she needed. “I’m ready for you to start the clocks going again,” she said to Hermione.

“Okay, now it’s off to the Ministry,” said Hermione. To Ginny, she added, “Just stay right here, you’ll never know I was gone.”

“I think this is the only time that’s literally true,” said Ginny. Hermione nodded, and an instant later, was standing a few feet to the left, releasing Flora’s tail.

“The Ministry people are in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, and Ron, Pansy, and Neville are upset with me for not taking them here,” reported Hermione. “They’re safe, they’re in the Great Hall.”

“Thank goodness,” said Ginny. “Now, one more thing to hope for, the biggest one.”

The Healer moved a tray containing supplies to the edge of the field. “Any time,” she said to Hermione. Nodding, Hermione moved the toggle of the device, and time started again.

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In his hospital bed, Harry put down his wand. “Well, that was the first time I ever tried to view such a long memory, I’m surprised that it worked.”

“It’s all that practice we’ve been doing,” said Hermione with a smile.

“I felt so bad for Ginny,” he said sadly. “You’re right, I would be going crazy if it was her that this was happening to.”

“She’ll be all right. But yes, obviously this is enormously difficult for her. Anyway, after what you saw, there was nothing else worth seeing especially. Fawkes came immediately after time started and dropped two tears on where the wasp stung you, and they gave you the blood transfusion. We still didn’t know anything for a half an hour. At one point McGonagall showed up, and I told her the story. She’ll probably be back as soon as she knows you’re up. Soon after that, they told us that you’d be okay, which they seemed pretty impressed by. Then McGonagall made Ginny and I go back to Hogwarts. I have a feeling she wanted to tell us to go back as soon as she got here, but knew we wouldn’t until we found out about you.”

“Why didn’t you bring her with you?”

“I didn’t want this to be any more conspicuous than it was. I’m sure McGonagall will let her see you soon. Also, I wanted you to see the memory of what happened, and I was the only one who could show you.”

“When did you take Petunia back?”

“Soon after time started again. I got special permission from the Aurors to Apparate her back; I thought asking her to take Flora or use a fireplace might be a bit much for her. They showed up immediately after time resumed, of course, since there had been an Apparation. I explained to them what happened before I took your aunt back. When we got back and I was about to leave, she talked to me for a minute. She asked me to tell you that she doesn’t want you treating her any differently than you otherwise would because of what happened. She doesn’t want there to be any feeling of obligation on your part. I told her I’d tell you.”

“I wonder why she said that,” mused Harry. “I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t have said that to a ‘normal’ relative. I suppose it probably means that she still doesn’t like me, and doesn’t want me to think that her agreeing to do this meant that she did, so I wouldn’t get a wrong impression. You did have to twist her arm pretty hard to get her to come. It’s funny, part of me is surprised that it took her so long to agree, and part is surprised that she did it at all.”

“I don’t think it was a matter of me twisting her arm. I think it just took a certain... adjustment on her part to be willing to do anything in the magical world, even something this important. She has this visceral negative feeling about it, and she just had to take a minute to accept the idea. It’s a good thing time was stopped. I actually considered taking her by force if she wouldn’t agree, but I realized that the people at St. Mungo’s probably wouldn’t have taken her blood if I brought her in unconscious, unless I lied and said she fainted or something.”

“Not to mention, you’d have been up on serious charges of violence against a Muggle, probably got your wand broken,” pointed out Harry.

“I think, considering the circumstances, I’d have been forgiven.” She gave him a gently chiding look, then added, “But even if not, you know very well I’d have done it anyway, regardless of that, and my ethical reluctance.”

“I know,” he said. “And thank you. For that, and for everything.”

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “You’re very welcome. I’m going to have to go in a minute, Flora’s telling me that McGonagall is coming.”

“Are you going to go now, before she gets here?”

Hermione shook her head. “You’d have to lie about my having been here, and she’d probably know anyway. Who knows, maybe she’ll let me stay for a bit.”

“I doubt it,” said Harry. “It’ll probably be security stuff. But I hope so.”

The door to the private room opened, and McGonagall and Snape walked in. “Miss Granger,” said McGonagall sternly, “I should advise you that while having a phoenix allows you to go anywhere you choose, there are rules to be considered.”

“I’m sorry, Professor,” said Hermione sincerely. “Harry woke up and wanted someone to visit. He didn’t actually ask, but Fawkes knew, and he told Flora, who told me. So I came. I also wanted to show him what happened, which I just got finished doing.”

“Very well, it is better that he knows. Normally, I would ask you to leave, but part of what we have to talk to Harry about involves you, so you may stay.” Hermione got up from her chair; as she sat in it, McGonagall conjured two more, and Snape and Hermione took seats.

“I have just returned from a meeting with the Dark Lord,” said Snape. “It will please you to know that he is most unhappy that this latest attempt has failed, and even more unhappy that you received crucial assistance from the device you took from him in June. He is very surprised that the headmistress never confiscated it.”

“I just assumed that you figured we’d need it more than you would,” said Harry.

McGonagall nodded. “It seemed a rather obvious conclusion.”

“There are two significant unanswered questions about this operation,” continued Snape. “One is the question of how the wasps were induced to seek out you in particular. Blood is required for that, and a larger amount than would have remained in the vial from two years ago. The other is the question of how the

wasps were brought into Hogwarts. No doubt Miss Granger did not have time to discover every last detail about this particular variety of wasp, but the target must be within a certain range of the wasp; that range is thought to be roughly fifty meters. There is no spot within a hundred meters of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom which is outside Hogwarts, so they had to have been released within the school.”

“So the question is, who got them in, and how,” filled in Harry. “I’m worried that the first thing people are going to do once they find out is assume it was Marcus.”

“It is not impossible that it could have been he, but it would have been a difficult operation for an adult to carry off, never mind an eleven-year-old,” said Snape. “The best reason not to suspect him is that if he had brought them with him at the beginning of the year, they would have had to be contained in some sort of magical apparatus, which would have failed to function when the magic was disrupted, resulting in the wasps’ premature release. Since that did not happen, we may reasonably assume that Mr. Avery had nothing to do with it. There are other ways it could have been done, but all involve the use of artifacts, and therefore can barely be guessed at.”

“Does that mean that we pretty much have to conclude that it was an artifact?” asked Harry.

Snape seemed to be trying to rein in impatience with Harry’s unsophisticated outlook on such things. “No, Professor, it is simply the best guess at the moment. We can conclude nothing, for lack of evidence. Any further deductions would simply be conjecture.”

“I understand,” said Harry. “As far as the blood, the only thing I can think of is that he used his own, which has some of mine in it. Would that work?”

“I would not have thought so,” replied Snape, “but I see no other way he could have procured your blood. The potion he used to return to physical form is

ancient and extremely seldom used, so we can only guess about its effects on his physicality. For all we know, his blood could be an exact match for yours.”

“With any luck, we’ll get a chance to find out someday,” said Harry, his expression one of determination.

“I hope it will not solely be a matter of luck,” replied Snape, though Harry could tell Snape understood his meaning. “To move on, there is another topic to discuss, which involves Miss Granger. The purpose of my meeting with the Dark Lord today was not solely for him to vent his displeasure. The combination of the failure of this recent effort and your development of the ability to incapacitate him has motivated him to take measures that I would have preferred he avoided.”

Snape appeared to be about to continue, but Harry cut in. “He wants you to kill me.”

Annoyed, Snape nodded. “Yes, though fortunately he still hopes that my viability can be salvaged, which gives me some leeway. He would ideally like me to find a way to dispose of you without being considered as a suspect, though he has also said that if I can find a way to do it that I am sure will not fail, and am able to escape, I have his permission to do so.”

“Considering how badly he wants me dead, I’m surprised he doesn’t just tell you to do it anyway, whether you get caught or not,” commented Harry.

“The Dark Lord does not instruct Death Eaters to go on missions that are certain to result in death or capture,” Snape explained. “Their loyalty to him is not based on ideology, or devotion to a cause. Rather, it is based on self-interest, the notion that they serve themselves by serving him; that is the basis on which he recruited them. He knows he would quickly lose their loyalty by sending them on suicide missions.”

I should have thought of that, thought Harry. “Is there a deadline?”

“Not exactly, except for the obvious one, the end of June. He would like it done sooner rather than later, of course, but since he hopes to maintain my viability as a future Hogwarts headmaster, he is giving me flexibility in developing the plans.



“Needless to say, we wish to encourage him to show restraint in his instructions to me. That is where you come in, Miss Granger.”

Hermione’s eyebrows rose high. “Me? What can I do about this?”

Giving Hermione an unusually serious look, McGonagall spoke. “The more likely it is that Professor Snape will become headmaster, the more restraint in this area Voldemort will show. We need, therefore, to give him more reason to think that what he wishes will happen.

“Since I just became headmistress this year, it is obviously not plausible that I would consider retirement. The only way that I might be removed from the picture is my sudden death, or a serious illness. He will be led to believe that the latter is the case.”

“Will he believe it, if Professor Snape tells him you told him that?” asked Harry. “It would seem too convenient.”

“Yes,” agreed McGonagall, “which is why it will not be done that way. I will give the appearance of illness through my actions. I will cut back on my teaching schedule, and you, Hermione, will fill in for me. You will teach all of my first and second year classes, as well as the seventh year class in which you are currently a student. I will say publicly that my reason is to devote more time to being headmistress, as well as give you teaching practice in view of your taking over full-time next year. Professor Snape will tell Voldemort that I am saying the same thing privately, but that he has noted a number of small clues which suggest what we wish him to believe. This will not seem suspicious, since fortunately it would be perfectly in character for me to tell no one if I did in fact develop such an illness. Obviously, we wish him to believe that the reason for my reducing my schedule is my illness.”

“I understand,” said Hermione, very serious. “Will this work with my schedule? I’d be willing to drop a class or two if I had to.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, a small smile crossed McGonagall’s face. “No doubt you are the only student for whom that would be a true

concession. Fortunately, the possibility of this occurring was foreseen, and part of what made the schedule so difficult for Professor Snape to assemble. The Transfigurations classes for the first and second years were deliberately scheduled where there are gaps in your schedule. You could take over the sixth year classes without having to drop any of your own, and you could teach the fourth year classes if you dropped Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. Those steps will be kept in reserve for the time being, to provide the potential for the appearance of a progression of the illness, should it become desirable.”

“When will I start teaching?” asked Hermione, clearly excited despite trying not to seem so.

With a hint of amusement in her eyes, McGonagall replied, “Monday, so I would suggest you spend part of your weekend refreshing your knowledge of first- and second-year Transfigurations.”

“Oh, I will, Professor. Thank you.”

Harry couldn’t resist a smile. “You know what’s best about this, Hermione... you’ll be able to come into the staff room now.”

“That will be nice,” she agreed. “Professor, it’s not important in view of all this, but I’m just wondering... I’ll have to give up the position of Head Girl, won’t I?”

“Yes, you will. You will have more than enough on your plate, and as was the case with Harry, it is not appropriate for one functioning as a teacher to hold the position. I will offer the position to Miss Parkinson.

“There is one thing I would like to impress on the both of you,” continued McGonagall sternly. “No one outside this room is to know about this. Not Mr. Longbottom, not Miss Weasley, not the other staff members, no one. This must remain as closely held as possible. Do you understand?”

Harry and Hermione both gave their acknowledgment. “Good. Professor Snape and I will be going. Harry, after we leave, you may call Miss Weasley and have Fawkes bring her here, and the other three after you are finished visiting with her.”

Turning to Hermione, McGonagall added, "I will meet with you later this evening to discuss the details of this change, Professor Granger."

Hermione beamed with pleasure at being addressed that way for the first time. "Thank you, Professor." Flora took flight, and Hermione was gone.

Snape and McGonagall then left, and Harry decided to simply send Fawkes for Ginny rather than call her on his hand. He showed up about five seconds later, Ginny holding on. She let go of him, and quickly leaned over and gave Harry a long kiss. "Now, that felt very... healing," he said with a smile as she took his hand and sat down.

"How do you feel?"

He thought for a second. "Not that bad, given what happened. Kind of tired, which I guess is my body trying to fight off the poison. But I know I'll be all right."

"Thanks to Hermione," said Ginny. "She was great."

He nodded. "I never thought I'd have my life saved by research skill, but that's pretty much what happened. Snape and McGonagall were just in here, and Hermione showed me the memory of what happened; I was able to view it with Legilimens. I felt so bad for you, what you have to go through every time this happens..."

"I knew what I was signing up for, Harry," she said earnestly. "I know that doesn't make it any easier when it happens, but I knew. I'll deal with it. But I feel bad that I wasn't able to hold it together any better with your aunt. I could have messed everything up, you could have died..."

"Considering the situation, I think you did well," said Harry, squeezing her hand. "I mean, look at how she was being... I'm sure there was a lot more you wanted to say, but didn't."

"Oh, you have no idea," she said fervently. Then sighing, she added, "But it wouldn't do any good. At least she ended up doing it."

“I think maybe what you said helped,” said Harry. “I mean, she hadn’t done anything remotely nice to me in my whole life, except let me stay there. I have a feeling that what she did was like letting me stay there, something she couldn’t quite live with herself if she didn’t do. Anyway, I think what you said nudged her towards doing it.”

“I hope so,” said Ginny. “I wasn’t exactly thinking really clearly. Hermione, again, was terrific. Knowing how emotional she can be, she was amazingly calm.” With a wry smile, she added, “I guess she knew one of us had to stay calm, and that it wasn’t going to be me.”

“It could also be Flora’s influence, at least partly,” suggested Harry. “Phoenixes do have that effect. It’ll be interesting over this year to see if we can see Hermione changing at all. Funny how you wouldn’t have been able to tell with me, because Fawkes joined me when I was changing anyway. He obviously helped, it was just hard to see how much was him and how much was the energy of love.”

They were silent for a minute, focusing on holding hands and looking into each other’s eyes. Ginny said, “It’s funny, just now, thinking about phoenixes made me think that I wished I could be connected to you like Fawkes is, that I could feel what you’re feeling, feel your love for me. But I can see it in your eyes, and it’s really almost the same thing.”

He felt a surge of love as he spoke, and wondered if it was reflected equally strongly in his eyes. “I know what you mean. I love you so much, Ginny. I wish I had the words to say it properly, but I don’t.”

“It’s all right,” she assured him. “Like I said, it’s in your eyes.” They looked at each other in silence again for a few minutes, then she ran a hand up his arm, smiling mischievously. “Oh, what I could do to you now, now that you’re too weak to resist.”

He chuckled. “I don’t recall that I normally do any resisting.”

“I mean in semi-public places, which is what this is. If I did what I’d like to do, you’d be trying to stop me, but you wouldn’t be able to.”

“If you did what I assume you’d like to do, not only would they throw you out, but it would be in the Prophet tomorrow,” countered Harry.

“It might be worth it. I wouldn’t mind having that device right now, that would help. Thanks goodness it worked for as long as it did.”

“Voldemort did say two hours, and he was probably right, but I can see why Hermione didn’t want to take any chances. He was so smug back in June, he didn’t care about telling us something useful like that because he thought she and I would never live to take advantage of it. I have a feeling that if he had me in his power again, he’d just kill me, and resist the temptation to find out what I know.”

“I don’t think he’s ever going to get you in his power again,” said Ginny confidently. “He’s not going to be able to get your wand away, and you can do the Imperius Charm. The next time you face him, he’ll be the one who has to worry, not you.”

Harry didn’t quite feel that confident, but he could see why she said it. “I hope you’re right. I guess we’ll find out at some point, probably late June.”

“Why then?” she asked.

“Don’t know, that’s just when these things always seem to happen. The first three times I saw him—in person, that is, not in dreams—were all at the end of June in the last three years.”

She shrugged. “It’s just coincidence.”

“Maybe. Anyway, how have things been at Hogwarts since this happened? And how long has it been?”

“Four hours, I think they thought you’d be out for longer than that. I assume the others told you that the Ministry people rounded up the rest of the wasps, at least they’re pretty sure they did. It turns out that the rest of the school was in danger; if their main target is out of range, they go for whoever’s nearest. Apparently they were bred for assassination, which makes sense. So, people were pretty nervous, and talking about it a lot. Obviously, people were really relieved to hear that you made it, which I know since I was the one to tell most people. I

wouldn't leave the hospital until I knew you were going to be all right." She chuckled at the memory she was about to relate. "McGonagall suggested I go back to the school before then, which of course I wouldn't. I think she made it a suggestion instead of an order because she figured I'd refuse the order, and didn't want to have to punish me for it, or have me defy her and not be punished."

"I don't see why she'd even suggest it," said Harry. "She must have had some idea of how you felt. I know that logically it doesn't matter whether you waited here or at Hogwarts, but it's the idea."

"Sometimes I think that she still doesn't really accept the idea that I'm your wife, or partner, or whatever you want to call it, because I'm not seventeen yet. At least now I'm sixteen, which is probably close enough to make it seem different to a lot of people."

"I'm sorry this had to happen on your birthday," he said.

"I have a feeling Voldemort didn't know. I doubt he celebrates birthdays. Anyway, having you be all right after that happened is a pretty good gift."

"I'm glad," he said, as he reached into his robes and pulled out a small, felt-covered box. "But I hope you'll like this one too." He handed it to her.

She looked pleased but slightly puzzled, so Harry assumed that a small, felt-covered box didn't signify in the wizarding world what it did in the Muggle world. She opened it and gasped; it was a silver ring with a small diamond. "Oh, Harry, it's beautiful..."

Smiling at her reaction, he said, "I'm glad you like it. I kind of wanted to get you one of the ones with bigger diamonds, but they seemed kind of... too much, like something you'd feel strange about wearing every day. I don't know much about rings."

She put it on her finger, and to Harry's further pleasure, it fit perfectly. "It's wonderful," she assured him as she stood to lean over and kiss him again. "Thank you, thank you so much. I love you."

“I love you too,” he said. “Do they have engagement rings in the wizarding world?”

“Yes, they do. Not everything is different, I guess.”

“Well,” he said, “maybe now McGonagall will accept the idea that it’s like we’re married, now that you have a ring and everything.”

She smiled and touched his face. “I’m sure she’ll be really impressed. Okay, no, she won’t. But I am, and that’s the important thing.” She looked at the ring again, then leaned over and kissed him again. “Do you want to have Fawkes bring the others?”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

Her smile grew even wider. “Well, I have to show this to someone.”

\* \* \* \* \*

He returned to Hogwarts the next day, though the St. Mungo’s Healers strongly recommended that he do nothing strenuous for the next few days. As he entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, having returned from his quarters after lunch, he reflected that he would have to ignore the recommendation at least once.

The desks were away from the center of the room, but the other five were all standing. “Harry, good,” said Hermione as he walked in. “You have to do the carpet. I tried one, but it wasn’t very good. I still have to work on it a bit.” Harry waved his wand, and a thick, red carpet was suddenly on the floor. “Thanks,” said Hermione as they all sat on it.

“You should do one for the common room,” suggested Ron, half-seriously. “A big, red carpet with the Gryffindor crest on it.”

Harry shook his head. “I think that would take some artistic ability, which I don’t have. I think a carpet like this is about the best I can do.”

“Okay, now I get to do my new spell,” said Hermione, seeming slightly excited.

“She called it a ‘do-not-disturb’ sign,” added Pansy, amused at Hermione’s attitude. “She said you’d understand the reference.”

Harry explained it to the others, then asked Hermione, “So, what kind of spell is it exactly? Does it tell people not to come in here?”

“No, it’s better than that,” she said enthusiastically. “It gives anybody passing by the impression that the room is empty; it’s like a smaller version of the spell that hides Hogwarts from Muggles. If someone tries to walk in, they’ll see what’s going on, but this’ll discourage people from seeing that we’re in here and coming in to chat, or to ask a question. Not that that would be such a terrible thing, since we’ll just be talking and doing homework, but I’d rather that people didn’t notice.”

“It’s a good idea,” agreed Pansy. “And I appreciate that you do this with me in mind, since the rest of you could just stay in the Gryffindor common room.”

“It’s no problem, obviously,” Ginny assured her. “We want to. So, Hermione, we won’t notice anything from this?”

“No, it’ll look the same to us. The door will be closed, and we’ll see it as closed, but anyone passing by will see it as open, since the classroom doors are always supposed to be open if there’s no class going on.” She raised her wand and pointed it at the door, which closed. “Okay, it’s done. Just so you know, I did tell McGonagall I was going to do this, I didn’t think it was right for her not to know. Of course, if she sent for one of us with the cat, the spell wouldn’t fool the cat anyway.” She opened her bag and started pulling out books, finally placing ten on the carpet next to her, in two stacks of five.

Ron raised his eyebrows a little, but said nothing. Noticing, Hermione asked, “What, no jokes?”

“It’s kind of like Harry with the first years a few weeks ago,” explained Ron. “The joke is already there, no point in saying anything.”



Hermione rolled her eyes fleetingly. “Obviously I’m not going to read all these, they’re just for reference. But I’m going to be teaching. I need to be able to look things up.”

“Yes, I remember all the times we saw Harry carrying ten books around, when he was going to be a teacher,” responded Ron with amusement.

“Transfigurations is different from Defense Against the Dark Arts,” she protested.

“No, I think you’re just different from Harry,” retorted Ron. “Or are you going to tell us that you wouldn’t have cracked ten books if you were going to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts?”

“You can think what you want,” she said defensively, in what Harry assumed was an implicit concession that he was right.

Ron turned his attention to Harry. “So, how are you feeling today?”

Harry shrugged. “A night of sleep really helped, but still a bit off, nothing I can really put into words. Not bad, though, considering I was a minute away from death less than twenty-four hours ago.”

“Well, anything’s going to look pretty good, compared to that,” said Neville.

“That’s true,” conceded Harry.

“I wondered, Harry,” asked Neville, “how do you feel about your aunt right now?”

Harry sighed. “That’s a tough question. On the one hand, what she did saved my life. On the other hand, any reasonably moral person would have done the same thing, and with far less hesitation. So, I’m not sure.”

“I kind of hate to say this, but you may not be giving her enough credit,” said Hermione. “I know she’s really far from Molly on the being nice scale, but for her, the magical world is a scary place. Awful things happen there, she can even read about them in the papers Molly sends her. Suddenly two people appear in her living room, in a way that Muggles would consider like breaking in, and tell her she has to go to somewhere and give blood, right away. I think some people would hesitate.”

“I think you’re being a little too understanding about it,” said Ron. “She mentioned that article, which she knew by then he had nothing to do with. It was as if that was a reason not to do anything.”

“I have a feeling that after she found out that Harry had nothing to do with it,” said Hermione, “she shifted her focus from the article in general to the specific things that Harry said, and didn’t deny having said. Of course, he didn’t say anything that she didn’t deserve, but this is looking at it from her viewpoint. If she denies to herself that she was that bad to Harry, then she could feel pretty put upon that he said those things. It shouldn’t affect her willingness to save his life, of course, and I definitely wouldn’t defend what she did. I’m just saying there may be reasons that she didn’t do it immediately other than that she’s a horrible person.”

“You mean, ‘in addition to,’” countered Ron. “Come on, Hermione, she *is* a... okay, maybe not ‘horrible,’ let’s keep that in reserve for Death Eaters, but she and her husband are just bad people, that’s all there is to it. You may want to think the best of people, and that’s nice, but they were just awful to Harry when he hadn’t done anything to deserve it. I don’t think anybody could look at what she did and say she’s not a bad person.”

“So, you don’t think it’s worth it to try to look at it from her point of view?” pressed Hermione.

“Not if her point of view is a total delusion, no,” shot back Ron. “If she’s focusing on the quotes, she knows they’re true, and she should be apologizing to Harry for what they did to him. I’m not interested in her point of view any more than I’m interested in Voldemort’s point of view.”

Hermione sighed in frustration. “Why do you have to be like this, Ron, so... hard and unforgiving?”

Pansy gave Hermione a serious look. “I guess we’re well matched, then, because I agree with him. She doesn’t deserve any kind of consideration at all, as far as I’m concerned.”

Hermione turned to Pansy, still frustrated. “People can change, Pansy. You—” Hermione abruptly stopped speaking, suddenly looking uncomfortable.

An unreadable look came to Pansy’s face as she stared at Hermione. “I should know that better than anyone’ is what you were going to say.”

“I’m sorry, Pansy, I—”

“No, you’re right, I do. Look... first of all, Hermione, don’t feel bad. I’m not angry with you, you shouldn’t have to walk on eggshells around me about this for the rest of your life. It would only really bother me if you were trying to be nasty, and I know you’re not. And it’s a good point.

“But Ron is right, she is a bad person. Now, you might say, ‘yes, Pansy, but someone could have said the same thing about you.’ Yes, they could. And you know what? They’d be right! I *was* a bad person! I should know *that* better than anyone, and I do.” Pansy’s voice was only slightly raised, her tone emphatic, her emotion obvious. “I didn’t know it at the time, of course. I had my own ‘point of view,’ my ways of justifying it to myself, like I’m sure Harry’s aunt does. She had her perfect, tidy, little life messed up by finding Harry on her doorstep, and she took it out on him. And I think that same part of her—I think we could call it ‘being a bad person’—was what caused her to hesitate and complain when Harry’s life could have been slipping away as she did, for all she knew.”

She paused, and thought for a few seconds as the others waited in silence. “I’ve had a chance to think about this a lot, over the past year. I don’t think anybody decides to be a bad person, like you wake up and say to yourself, ‘I think I’ll be bad today.’ I think it happens in little bits, little choices you make every day. You do what makes you feel good, or less bad, and manage not to think about who you’re hurting, or think they somehow deserve it. You do what’s easy instead of what’s right, like Professor Dumbledore said when Voldemort came back. In my case, I just wanted to feel good about myself and discovered I could do it by making other people feel bad, though I didn’t even really think about what I was doing. With her,

some part of her had to know that it was wrong to vent her frustrations on an innocent child, but she did it anyway.

“Yes, people can change. I did, and she could. But you have to decide to do it, to realize that what you were doing was wrong. If she did, I’m sure Harry would be... well, he’d do his best to forgive her, though it wouldn’t be easy. He forgave me easily, but I hadn’t hurt him nearly as badly as she had. Anyway, she hasn’t done that yet, taken a painful look in the mirror, like I did. Maybe I’m unforgiving because I suffered a lot to get to where I am. But until she shows any interest in recognizing what she did, I don’t think she deserves to have anyone go out of their way to understand her ‘point of view.’”

There was another silence. Harry looked at Pansy and saw determination; he understood it hadn’t been easy for her to say what she said, and he was sure that talking about her past would never be easy for her. Hermione looked abashed, but not convinced. “Pansy,” she said softly, “I couldn’t argue with you. And I wasn’t trying to excuse what she did, either yesterday or when Harry was a child. Just explain it.”

Pansy’s tone was still hard, but managed to get across that she wasn’t upset at Hermione. “I think Ron explained it pretty well when he said she was a bad person. She’s a bad person who doesn’t want to see herself as a bad person, and she gave the blood because she couldn’t find a good enough reason to avoid doing it. I don’t want Harry thinking that what she did means anything other than that. There’s simply no reason to think it does.”

Hermione looked at Pansy, as if trying to understand her more clearly. “Do you think I’m trying to pick up where Molly left off? Trying to reconcile him and his aunt?”

“No, Hermione, I don’t. I know you’re just trying to think of people in the best possible way. But Harry’s going to get hurt if he starts thinking like that and it turns out his aunt’s attitude hasn’t changed.”

“Don’t worry, that’s not going to happen,” said Harry, speaking for the first time in several minutes as his situation was being discussed. “I’ll write a letter, be polite, express gratitude. But I won’t say anything that’s not true, and I won’t have any expectations of any kind of response. Like I said to Ginny and Dudley that day, that’s too well ingrained in me to forget.”

“I was actually pretty surprised that Dudley told her that,” said Ginny. “I wouldn’t have thought that would come up in a conversation between them. When she said that at St. Mungo’s, I could tell that she knew it was true, she wasn’t denying it. Anyway, Harry, that sounds like a good thing to do.”

“Yes, it does,” agreed Hermione. “Harry, I want you to know that I wasn’t trying to do what Molly did.”

“It’s all right, I know. Well, Neville, I guess the answer to your question is that I don’t feel a lot different about her. For that to happen, she’d have to do something she didn’t feel utterly compelled to do.”

“Wow, did I start this? Sorry about that,” said Neville innocently, as the others chuckled. “I’d forgotten.”

“It’s an interesting question to think about, though,” commented Ginny. “It’s like, if we think about evil, we think about Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Harry’s aunt isn’t what we’d call evil, but... there’s different degrees, I suppose.”

“The interesting thing is,” said Pansy, “I’m sure she wants to think of herself as good. That was what you and Hermione were speaking to when you were talking to her. If she didn’t care whether she saw herself that way, you probably couldn’t have convinced her.”

“Thank goodness for that, then,” said Ron. “But is there anybody, really—okay, besides Death Eaters—who doesn’t think of himself as good, or at least, wanting to be?”

“Probably, people who life’s beaten up a bit,” suggested Harry. “I remember Albus suggesting that Tom Riddle’s childhood probably had a lot to do with what happened to him. But even from my own experience, there have been plenty of

times I felt really put upon, and at those times I'm not sure I cared about whether I was 'good,' whether I was doing the right thing. Not only the time when Sirius died, but other times too. At that moment, you just feel like you don't care, like whatever you do is okay because you're so angry, or in pain. If somebody's life was really awful, I could imagine them developing that kind of attitude."

"When you say that," said Neville, with a sad expression, "the first thing I think of is Blaise. I mean, I don't know what his home life is like, but until last year, his school life had to have been horrible. You always looked forward to coming to Hogwarts, but I bet he dreaded it. I wonder what his attitude is like now, but he's so shy, it's hard to know."

"Oh, that reminds me, I was going to tell you," said Harry. "I ran into him on the way here. He was kind of nervous, as usual, and said he wanted to talk to me in private. I figured it was about how the class was going. We went to the nearest classroom, and then it took him a minute to tell me what he wanted, because he got even more nervous. I soon found out why; it turned out he was taking me up on my offer from class, and wanted a hug."

All five gaped at him. "You must be kidding," said Ron.

Harry shook his head. "Nope. He could barely get the words out, but that was what he wanted to ask."

"Oh, that's so sweet," said a smiling Hermione. "How did he react when you hugged him?"

"It was almost like he'd never been hugged before," said Harry, "or that he was really nervous, but he didn't hold on very tight. I had to tell him he should hold on harder, and then he did. I hugged him for longer than I normally would, because he didn't seem to have the hang of it. When I let him go, it was almost like he was surprised, like he thought it was supposed to go on longer or something. I asked him if he'd like to try it again, but he got kind of embarrassed and shook his head. I just said, 'Okay, then, if you change your mind, let me know, see you later,' and left. He seemed uncomfortable, and I didn't know what I should say. I guess it's usually

awkward talking to him, because he doesn't know how to really relate to people. But I was glad he asked, it just seems like a good sign."

"A very surprising one," added Neville. "I would never have thought he'd do that. I mean, I've been helping him twice a week for three weeks, and he hasn't quite managed to be comfortable talking to me. This had to be a big deal for him."

"I hope it helps him come out of his shell a bit," said Harry. "Anyway, it wasn't only him. I got two other hugs this morning before lunch, from Sally-Anne and Susan. Susan was pretty funny, she said, 'I figured if Justin can hug you, then it's all right if I do.' I think with them, it was that they were happy that I survived yesterday, and just picked that way to show it because of what I said in class."

Ginny smiled. "Soon half the school will be running around hugging each other, and McGonagall won't know what to do."

"Well, I only plan on saying this to the sixth and seventh years. I'm not sure I want first and second years feeling like they should hug each other; I mean, it's awkward enough for the seventh years."

"Somehow, I have a feeling that word will filter down," said Ginny, with a tone that teased Harry for not having thought of it.

"The Slytherin seconds will do it for sure, you know how they are about anything you say," said an amused Pansy. "Actually, it may really help them. That young, they won't be so comfortable hugging each other, but they'll do it. Doing something that makes them overcome embarrassment could be helpful."

"That is kind of the idea, at least partly," agreed Harry, "but I don't want to push too hard. This could be kind of a sensitive issue. What if someone asks someone else for a hug, but they say no? Feelings could get hurt, so I want to be careful."

"Of course, that's true, but--"

Pansy was interrupted by a knock at the door; the six looked at each other in surprise. "I thought you said the door appeared open to anyone outside," whispered Ron.

“It does,” answered Hermione. “Whoever knocked knows we’re in here, and about the spell. It has to be McGonagall. I’ll open the door and withdraw the spell.” The door opened, and to Harry’s great surprise, in walked Rudolphus Bright.

Harry leaped to his feet, the others not far behind. Smiling, Bright surveyed the room. “Very nice, it’s like a private little study area.”

“Minister,” said Harry as he shook Bright’s outstretched hand. “Let me introduce you to the others—”

“Hardly necessary,” said Bright as he offered Ron his hand, then the others, in turn. “Ron... Neville... Pansy... Ginny, I’m sorry you didn’t have a very nice birthday yesterday... and Hermione, congratulations on becoming a teacher. It’s a pleasure to meet you all. ‘I’ve heard a lot about you’ is one of those things you just normally say, but in this case, it’s quite true. All one needs to do is read the Prophet.”

He turned to face Harry. “Harry, apart from expressing relief that you recovered from what happened yesterday, there are a few things I came to discuss with you. I was thinking we could go into your office, but if you’d just prefer to discuss it here, with the others, that’s fine too. I know that what concerns you concerns them too. Whatever you’d like.”

Harry wondered whether Bright had a preference, and why he suggested staying in the classroom at all; perhaps he would ask something that Harry wouldn’t want to do but his friends would want? He knew his friends probably wouldn’t be offended if he wanted to have the meeting privately, but he decided that having them there would save him the time of telling them about it later. “Here is good,” he said. “Should I conjure some chairs, or...”

Bright shook his head as he bent over and sat on the carpet. “I spend most days in meetings in straight-backed chairs, so sitting on the floor is a nice change of pace.”



Harry sat opposite Bright, and his friends sat nearby, facing them. “Hermione, could you...” asked Bright. Nodding, she pointed her wand at the door and resumed the spell which gave the impression of an empty room.

“You know, Minister,” started Harry, who interrupted himself when Bright glanced at him with an unspoken correction. “Rudolphus,” he continued, “you really don’t have to come out here every time you want to talk to me. You know I can be at the Ministry in a few seconds, with a lot less trouble than it takes you to come here.”

Bright nodded. “I know. Did Dentus explain why I came to see you last time?”

“Yes, he said it was a show of respect. I appreciate it, but you’re vulnerable from the Owl Office to the Hogsmeade gate.” With a small smile, he added, “We could just agree that I understand that you respect me, and meet at the Ministry anyway.”

“I suppose we could,” agreed Bright, seemingly amused at Harry’s practical outlook. “I’ll think about it in the future. But it’s really not that dangerous. I have two Aurors with me, and I don’t tell anyone my plans in advance, even the Aurors. It’s always nice to see Hogwarts again, but probably my reason for coming will be plain soon.

“First of all, Harry, I wanted to talk to you about what you and Hermione did at the end of June. I was just briefed earlier this week on those events, and I was shown the memory that Kingsley had of seeing it. Before I go on, I have to say that even though I’m well aware of all you’ve done, I was still amazed that you could stay that focused, both of you. It was extremely impressive.”

“We wouldn’t have gotten out of there without Albus, though,” Harry pointed out.

“That was the most amazing thing,” said Bright. “I wasn’t sure whether to believe Kingsley when he told me; he said he could barely believe it himself. And he’s done it a few times since then?”

“The most recent one was the night the magic went out, when Voldemort attacked the Aurors. But fortunately, I can do that now, so I hope he won’t have to.”

“The reason I brought it up is that I wanted to discuss what you, the two of you,” said Bright, glancing at Hermione, “accomplished in terms of detecting his whereabouts. As you know, for him to be able to be detected, relays have to be set up in such a way that no point can be farther than two miles from a relay. For Britain to be totally covered, several hundred relays will have to be manufactured and set up. Unfortunately, while they’re not terribly expensive to make, they aren’t cheap either. I mention this because just a few days ago I approved funding for their manufacture, and it should be starting any time.”

Harry frowned. “Why did it take so long? I would have thought they’d have been doing it already. It’s been almost three months.”

Bright nodded sympathetically. “Unfortunately, there are sometimes practical obstacles to doing what needs to be done. The precise knowledge of what happened at the Veil of Mystery was very closely held. Kingsley decided not to tell Fudge, limiting him to information barely exceeding what was made public. One effect this had was to delay the production of the relays. Kingsley tried to get it funded in back-channel ways, which wouldn’t come to the Minister’s attention, but with limited success.”

“Why didn’t he tell Fudge?” asked Harry.

Hermione spoke up. “He must have decided that Fudge couldn’t be trusted with anything so confidential. I didn’t know Fudge at all, so I don’t know whether he could keep a secret, but Kingsley must have thought he couldn’t. Also, telling him would mean telling him the whole story, including what Albus did, and I don’t think Fudge would have believed it.”

Bright nodded at Hermione, impressed. “Exactly right. You have to keep in mind, Harry, that Fudge felt very threatened by Dumbledore, which is ironic, since Dumbledore was the least threatening person you could imagine. But Dumbledore passed on the Minister’s job, as you know, and Fudge probably always wondered if

Dumbledore would decide he made a mistake, and try to take it after all. It's kind of like if you married a woman who was turned down by another man before ending up with you; you'd always wonder if she'd go to him if he decided he wanted her. Since Fudge wanted the job so much, he couldn't understand why Dumbledore didn't.

“Getting back to the point, even if he had been shown the memory, Fudge probably wouldn't have believed that Dumbledore caused Voldemort's collapse, since there was no hard evidence to support it. Also, you might not have known this, but it was understood in the Ministry that Fudge talked about things to his friends a little too much, and with Voldemort back, one can never know who could be subverted, or have their memories raided. Kingsley decided it was better to go slow than to take that kind of risk.”

“But he told you,” said Harry.

“Fortunately, he decided I could be trusted.” With a wry smile, he added, “It seems I have a reputation for discretion. Also, I had no issues with Dumbledore. Needless to say, I'm completely on board with this, and I pushed through the funding earlier this week. No one is going to know the purpose except a few Aurors and the people manufacturing the relays, and even they won't know what it's for.

“Even doing that much, however, has attracted attention. Two days ago, I received an owl marked ‘Minister's Eyes Only,’ with the correct code for such correspondence. Obviously, most owls I get are screened by my staff, and not only because I don't have time to read them all. A very few people know the code that will ensure that a letter will be opened by me. This particular owl, however, was clearly sent by a Death Eater. It said that if I continued what I had done that week, I would end up like Fudge.” Harry exchanged startled glances with his friends, which Bright noted. “Yes, my reaction was a lot like that, only more so. And then less than a minute later, the owl that brought it fell over, dead. A nice touch, that,” he added sarcastically.

“Did the letter mention the relays specifically, or just the idea that you were doing something that opposed them?” asked Harry.

“The latter. So, whoever they got the information from knows that the money was disbursed to do something to fight Voldemort, just not what exactly. It’s pretty hard to keep a secret these days at the Ministry, since the only way to make sure that Voldemort or Death Eaters who can do Legilimency don’t get to people is to have them never be alone. And even that wouldn’t be foolproof.”

“Certainly Voldemort could take care of two or three people at once,” agreed Harry. “I assume the Aurors agree that this is genuine, and that your life is in danger?”

Bright smiled grimly. “The Aurors made it clear from the day I took this office that my life was in great danger, not that I needed to be told. But I take your meaning, and yes, they agree that this specific threat is genuine. And for high-security situations like this, when I say ‘they,’ I’m generally referring to just Kingsley and Dawlish; it’s not as though every Auror knows this kind of thing.

“So, that brings me to why I’m here. Security for the Minister was tightened after Fudge was killed, and even more so a few days ago. Except for unusual situations such as this, I am only ever in two places: my home, and my suite of offices at the Ministry. No casual walks around Diagon Alley chatting with the public, much as I enjoy that kind of thing. The Aurors are pretty sure that what happened to Fudge won’t happen to me, at least not quite the same way; anyone who gets into my presence is magically checked to make sure they are who they appear to be. They also told me that Fudge didn’t take his security seriously enough, and wasn’t careful about who he allowed to get near him. So, I’m sort of living in a cocoon. I’m safe, but Kingsley and Dawlish concede that if Voldemort were to attack personally, with the help of Death Eaters, he could succeed. There’s not much they can do about him, unless they outnumber him ten to one.”

Harry now felt he understood why Bright had come to see him, but he wanted to wait for Bright to say the words. As if having read Harry’s mind, Bright

continued, “You’ve probably worked out by now what I’m here to ask. I’m very reluctant to do it—and please feel free to check me—partly because I have so much respect for what you’ve done, and partly because I know you turned down Fudge. Of course, I’m not asking for the same thing he did. I don’t want you standing around me all the time, even if you could do it, which you can’t. What I would ask is that there be a way I could signal you, say, by touching a ring, very simple. I would do it only if I were under attack. There would be two signals: one for my office, one for my home. You would simply Apparate to my office or my home.”

Harry nodded his understanding. “Do both places allow for Apparation?”

“My office doesn’t, and they’re putting a plot around my home now. The one around the office is similar to the Hogwarts one, so you’d be able to defeat it, but Voldemort probably wouldn’t. They think Voldemort might be able to defeat the one around my home. They could have you do it, but then the problem would be that you couldn’t Apparate in either.” Bright was silent, waiting for either an answer or more questions.

Harry thought for a few seconds, and found that his mind was largely made up. He turned to face his friends. He thought about asking Bright to leave the room while they discussed it, but decided to let him stay. “I’m inclined to do it, but I want to know what you think.”

“I don’t like it,” said Ginny, “but I admit my reasons have more to do with you being my partner than anything else. I just don’t want you in any avoidable danger. You get enough as it is.”

“It is different from what Fudge wanted,” said Hermione, “it’s still the same basic problem. You’re...” She turned to Bright, solemn. “I’m sorry to be so blunt, Minister, but you’re not as important as Harry.”

Equally solemn, he nodded. “I know. I know about the prophecy, though even if I didn’t, it would still be very clear. But I’m not simply asking out of fear for my life, though I admit I do feel that. There are other considerations as well.”

Neville spoke. "It shouldn't be done by Harry, he's too valuable. It should be one of us."

"You couldn't Apparate in," pointed out Harry.

"We could take Fawkes or Flora."

"You couldn't deal with Voldemort if it was him. I assume that's why you asked me, and not them," he added to Bright, who nodded.

"Albus could take care of him," countered Neville.

"No, we can't plan for that," insisted Harry. "He's there to do that for emergencies and for when there's a real chance to catch Voldemort, not as a resource that we can plan to use. You know what it's like for him. I know what it was like when Voldemort possessed me, it was horrible, and I think it's worse for him. We simply can't make plans on the assumption that he'll do it."

"You could ask him," suggested Ginny.

"No, I won't ask him that," said Harry emphatically. "That's out of the question."

"But the whole point of this is to keep you safe!"

"No, the point is to defeat Voldemort. I understand that keeping me safe is a part of that, but we have to do what we would do if he wasn't around. Remember, he said in July that he couldn't do more than what he planned to do when he went through the Veil."

"Why can't he, anyway?" asked Ron, curious.

"Because they're not supposed to interfere in physical matters from there. Not that they're not allowed to, he said, just that they don't. It's not like a rule, but it's a guideline he intends to follow. He'll do exactly what he planned when he was alive, and no more than that, you know how he always was about principle. Once he starts doing that, he says, it starts interfering with how we're supposed to live our lives. It's kind of complicated. I pretty much understood it when he told me—this was when I asked him to tell me who killed Skeeter, and he wouldn't—but it's hard for me to explain any more than that. But I know what he'd say."

Harry had glanced at Bright a few times during the conversation, and noticed a slowly deepening look of shock on Bright's face. At first he didn't understand the reason, but suddenly he did. "I'm guessing that when the Aurors told you about this, they didn't mention that I'm in communication with Albus."

Bright's mouth hung open slightly. "Yes, that would be a good guess," he said with understatement. "How in the world..."

Harry smiled in sympathy. "The same way he does the rest of what he does. In other words, we don't know. But it was part of what he planned before he left. It's part of why he taught me Legilimency; he said it helped make a connection to my mind. We talk when I'm asleep."

"Amazing... just amazing, just as much as what he does to Voldemort," said an obviously astonished Bright.

"Yes, it is," agreed Harry, who then turned back to his friends. "Anyway, if anyone does it, it has to be me. I'm the only one who can."

"Well," said Neville reluctantly, "it should be done, much as I hate to say it now. Especially after what happened to Fudge. I mean, you're right, Hermione, about Harry being too important to risk. But the problem is, they've already killed Fudge. What if they kill him?" he asked, gesturing to Bright. "Someone else takes the job, and they kill him too? It could get to a point where nobody would take the job, or whoever did would be too petrified to do anything to fight Voldemort, and I'm sure that's part of what Voldemort has in mind. We tease Harry about being made Minister of Magic someday, but it could come to that now, just because he'd be the only one who could survive the job. Not to mention that the Minister being killed would be bad for the community's morale. One Minister of Magic being killed, well, they got lucky. But two, it seems like we can't protect people, and if the Minister isn't safe, who is? It would make everyone feel like they're not safe."

Unhappy, Hermione nodded. "Yes, I see your point. I assume that's part of the reason you came to ask this," she said to Bright.

“Yes, and thank you, Neville, for making the point so I didn’t have to. It is true, but I don’t want to have to make that argument, since I have an ulterior motive... that is, wanting to stay alive,” said Bright with a self-deprecating air.

“I don’t think anyone would blame you for that,” said Hermione quietly.

“No, I suppose not,” agreed Bright, “but I did choose to pursue this job, I knew the risks. I knew Fudge had asked something like this of you, and I planned not to. It just seems... different, in the face of a specific threat, one made in retaliation for my doing what I should be doing.”

“To tell you the truth,” said Harry, both to Bright and the others, “I hadn’t thought of what Neville said, though I think he’s right. I was looking at it in another way.” A determined expression came to his face. “I feel like it could be an opportunity.”

“Kingsley brought up this point; I was wondering if you would. I see you have quite a competitive spirit.” To the others, Bright said, “Harry is thinking of me as bait. If Voldemort attacks, Harry’s hoping not just to save me, but to have a chance at catching Voldemort.”

“But he can always just disappear, with that device he has,” pointed out Ron.

“Then before I do my thing on him, I’ll try to find a way to get the device off. If I can do that, then knock him out, we’ve got him. I just need to figure out where he keeps it. Hermione, maybe you can research magical ways to get things off of people.”

Amused, Bright said, “We do have people at the Ministry who can do that kind of research, Harry. Not that you wouldn’t be equally good,” he added to Hermione.

“Yes, but I don’t want him to know I’m thinking about doing that, and you know that security’s a problem. Maybe Professor McGonagall would research it too if I asked her.”



“Harry,” asked Pansy with obvious concern, “are you sure you want to go looking for a confrontation with him?”

“Yes, I am,” he said fervently, more strongly than he meant to. “I’m sick of this, Pansy. Sick of waiting for the next attempt, wondering if it’s going to get one of you instead of me. Sick of how it affects Ginny, and the rest of you. And just... angry in general, because people keep dying while he’s out there. I’m waiting for the day that Kingsley calls me and says, we’ve got the relays in place, we know where he is. Then I’ll say, let’s go and get him. I’m sick of fighting a defensive fight, I want to go on the offensive.” He paused as the others looked at him with varying degrees of surprise. With a sheepish expression, he added, “Sorry, Pansy, I didn’t mean to be saying that to you especially. I guess I just needed to get it off my chest.”

“That’s okay, I understand,” she said “I can see how you’d feel that way.”

He nodded his thanks, then turned to Bright. “I want you to know, Rudolphus, that I’m not saying that we should deliberately risk your safety so I can have a chance at Voldemort. It’s just that—”

Bright waved him off. “I know, Harry. If he’s going to be there anyway, you’d rather face him than not face him. I was using the word ‘bait’ loosely, I know that isn’t really how you think of it.

“I guess you’ll be working out the details of how it’ll work with Kingsley. You’ll need a tour of my office and my home, of course; whenever you two decide is convenient is fine.”

“Just so you know, Minister,” said Neville, “that wherever he goes, the rest of us will be within seconds, on the next available phoenix.”

With a momentary grin at Neville’s phrasing, Bright nodded. “I know. Your job is keeping him alive, and judging from yesterday, you do it very well. I don’t want anything happening to him, either.” Bright stood, and Harry and the others did as well. “Well, Harry, I’m not sure what I can say except ‘thank you.’ The politician in me wants to offer you something in return, but I know that isn’t the way you work.”

With a small smile, Harry responded, "Maybe you can do the right thing for me sometime."

Bright laughed. "I hope so. It was good to meet all of you. Thanks again." He turned, walked to the door, and left.

The six sat back down. "I hope nobody held anything back because he was there," said Harry. "I just felt like if we were going to say no to him, we should do it to his face, because unlike Fudge, he asked to my face."

Ron shook his head. "No, I wasn't bothered. I wasn't thrilled with it, obviously, and I felt a lot like Ginny and Hermione did. But I could see Neville's point, too. I also felt like, and I didn't want to say this in front of him, but it was like, we finally seem to have a decent Minister of Magic, let's see if we can keep him alive."

"Yes, I was impressed, too," agreed Hermione. "I read about him a fair bit in the Prophet, of course, but he's more impressive in person. He doesn't take himself any more seriously than he should. I said that thing about Harry being more important partly because I wanted to see how he would react. From what I've heard, Fudge would have gotten all upset and defensive, even though it was true. And yes, Neville, you were right. After you said that, I felt like I should have thought of it myself. Thank goodness he isn't like Fudge, the decision would have been a bit harder."

"Do you really think we should consider how good a Minister he is when making that kind of decision?" asked Pansy, surprised. "Neville's argument doesn't consider whether he's competent or not."

"I suppose," conceded Hermione. "It's just harder to contemplate risking Harry's life for someone like Fudge. I think I meant it would be harder emotionally, not logically."

"I don't feel like this is risking my life, though," said Harry, still with a determined look. "Not that nothing could happen, I know it could. I won't be overconfident. But the next time I face him will be the first time I do knowing that

I can do this to him. That gives me quite a bit of confidence. I don't have to worry about dueling him, I can just do this. The only thing I have to worry about with him is walking into a trap, and that won't happen with this, because the places I'll be going are Bright's home and office, which will already be protected; he'll have a hard enough time getting in, never mind setting up something nasty waiting for me."

"That makes sense," agreed Hermione. "A good rule of thumb would be to try never to go anywhere that he's had a chance to be at for a while. Of course, that's not always possible. They can do a huge Apparation ambush, for example, and we don't have much choice but to go there. At least if we do, forty Aurors will be around."

Harry moved over to near Ginny, who looked unhappy. He took her hand and asked, "Are you upset?"

She shrugged. "Not upset exactly, definitely not at you. I know why you want to get him, and I don't blame you. It's just what I said before, I hate the idea of you being in any danger at all."

"But if he attacks, he'll be in more danger than me—"

"I know, Harry. It's not rational. I know you have to face him sooner or later, and he'll be on the defensive if he's at Bright's home or office. He probably won't do it at all, for that reason. It's just the idea. I haven't forgotten that cry I had at St. Mungo's yesterday. The reasons for doing this are good, which is why I didn't argue against it when he was here. Believe me, if I was dead set against it, I'd have let you know. This is an emotional reaction."

He moved next to her and put an arm around her. "I can understand that. Funny, I have an emotional reaction too, mine is just to go after him. But I'm sure Hermione was right yesterday, this is harder for you than it is for me. I'm sorry."

She kissed him on the cheek. "There's nothing for you to be sorry about," she assured him.

"I know. I just meant I'm sorry that you have to go through all this. But there is something I have to tell you that might cheer you up."

“You got me another ring?” she asked, feigning excitement.

Harry smiled. “No, I think this is better than that.”

Her eyebrows rose, as did some of the others’. “What would be better than that?”

“Something that Albus talked to me about last night,” he explained. “I thought about telling you alone, but the rest of you would find out soon enough, and I’d rather you heard it from me.” He saw that Ginny and the others were now quite curious as to what he would say. “First of all, you know how I’ve said that if you think of Albus in a focused way, he’ll hear what you’re saying. Apparently Professor McGonagall took advantage of that to let me know something she didn’t want to say directly to me, or through anyone living.

“Part of the memory Hermione showed her in the Pensieve of what happened yesterday included your cry that you just mentioned. Albus said that she felt awful for you too, and understands how hard this is for you. She also knows that we haven’t used my quarters for what we used it for in the summer, even though it wasn’t clear whether she’d mind if we did or not. I don’t know how she knows, but she does. He said she appreciates the fact that we didn’t push that. So, in view of all the stuff we have to go through, and probably will, she had Albus tell me that once a week, for an hour, we can go there if we want to.” He smiled as he saw surprise and pleasure quickly appear on Ginny’s face. “The only conditions are that we’re discreet enough that no one outside the six of us knows, and that we never mention it or refer to it to her. She wants to be able to pretend that it isn’t happening.”

Ginny was now grinning broadly. “I can do that.”

The others chuckled. “I bet you can,” said Pansy.

“You’re right, this is better than another ring,” said Ginny, still very happy. “I wish I could thank her, but I’ll live with the fact that I can’t. It’s so funny how she’s like that, that she can’t manage to say that to your face.”

Harry had had the same thought. “Yeah, I got the feeling Albus was kind of amused, too. Well, it was nice of her to do it, she didn’t have to.”

“Yes, definitely,” agreed Ginny. “Well, everyone, Harry and I have to go. We’ll be back in an hour.”

The others laughed. “No, let’s wait until we would have been done here anyway,” suggested Harry. “There’s no hurry.”

“I was kidding, of course,” replied Ginny, “but we do have to think about not being interrupted. You’ve got the Aurors tomorrow, right?”

Neville nodded. “Yeah, I talked to them last night, they’re going to do the training tomorrow instead of today, give Harry a bit of time to recover. Of course, he’ll need more time to recover after you’re done with him.”

Everyone laughed, even Harry a little. “I don’t know, Neville, it’s only an hour,” joked Ginny. “It’s good for him, anyway.”

“Yes, they do want us to be in good physical condition,” agreed Neville. “I don’t think they care exactly how we go about doing it. Say,” he added, turning to Hermione, “won’t you be getting teachers’ quarters, now that you’re a teacher?”

Smiling, she answered, “From next year, for sure. I assume there are empty quarters somewhere, waiting for me, but I’m not going to ask her about it. Harry was a teacher for all of last year and didn’t have quarters. But she’s not—and yes, I know you were joking—she wouldn’t let us do it anyway.”

“I felt kind of bad about that,” admitted Harry. “I’d like you guys to be able to do it, too.”

“Harry, you’re a special case,” said Pansy. “You and Ginny have all this stress. I know we do too, but it’s much worse for you. I think this is why McGonagall is keeping it so unofficial, she doesn’t want the whole ‘if they can do it why can’t we’ thing. We don’t begrudge you this.” With an encouraging glance at Ron, she added, “Do we.”

“Evidently not,” said Ron, as if genuinely concerned about her reaction if he answered any other way. Then more serious, he added, “No, of course not. Well,

we should get to our studying, I'm sure Hermione can't wait to get at all those books. I'll bet there's all kinds of things I've forgotten from first-year Transfigurations."

"I'll be sure to call on you in our next class, then," teased Hermione.

"You'd better not," warned Ron. "No more often than McGonagall did, anyway."

"She never called on you," pointed out Hermione.

Ron looked at the others with a put-on impressed expression. "See, there's that quick mind of hers again. She grasped my point instantly."

Hermione's response was pre-empted by a knock on the door. The others looked at each other in surprise again. "McGonagall this time?" wondered Neville. With a shrug, Hermione pointed her wand at the door, which opened to reveal Hedrick and Helen.

They gaped, as Harry realized that they had been looking into a previously empty classroom which suddenly had six people in it. "Cool!" enthused Hedrick.

"I'd love to learn that spell," said Helen as they walked into the room.

"I'll teach you when you're a seventh year," joked Hermione. "I only just learned it myself."

"How did you know we were here?" asked Neville.

Hedrick held up the Marauders' Map. "Professor Potter gave us this last year, after Hermione made you your maps; we used it to keep track of Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. We don't have that much use for it these days, but now we're afraid we might."

"You mean, the wasps," said Pansy.

Helen nodded. "Of course, we're worried that Marcus might have done it. We're sure you've thought of that, but we still wanted to check."

"We don't think it was him," said Harry. "Professor McGonagall doesn't either, because they would have escaped when the magic went out, if he had brought them into Hogwarts. Don't tell anyone outside the ten of you that she said

that, by the way. Anyway, we don't know how they got in, and we probably won't be able to find out easily, but we're pretty sure it wasn't him."

"Have you talked to him, gotten to know him at all?" asked Hermione.

"A little bit," said Helen. "We don't get too many chances to talk to first years, we kind of have to go out of our way to do it. But we talked to him a little the night the magic went away, and the next day, because of the idea that it was already decided that he was a Slytherin. He seemed all right, a little quiet, maybe. He didn't seem that different from anyone else, and he was really impressed with what you guys did that night. Which, obviously, everyone was. We didn't ask him about his family, of course. At least, he doesn't act like the other sons of Death Eaters. So, we hope he'll be okay."

"I think he will be," said Harry encouragingly. "He's been like that in my classes too, just a normal student. Also, I discovered—and please don't repeat this either—that his father hasn't lived at home since Voldemort came back, and his mother doesn't like Death Eaters. So, we really think he'll be all right."

"We'll check the map sometimes, just to be sure," said Hedrick. "Not only him, just anyone really out of place."

Ginny glanced at Harry, then spoke to Hedrick. "Um, speaking of that, there will be times when Harry and I are out of place, in Harry's living quarters. It's important that you not mention that to other people outside the ten of you."

"Okay, but why not?" asked Hedrick innocently.

Smiling, Helen rolled her eyes. "I'll explain it when we tell the others about this."

"So," said Ron, "have you heard about our last Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson, at least until Harry was attacked?" Harry wondered if he was trying to distract Hedrick from asking further questions.

"Of course, we always ask Pansy to tell us what happened after every lesson," said Helen. Looking at Ron's face, she added, "Oh, you mean the hugging

thing. Well, we all hugged Pansy, so that was a good start. But I think it's going to be hard for the boys."

"Why us especially?" asked Hedrick defensively.

"Because boys are more uncomfortable with that than girls, everyone knows that," said Helen, with a mild air of superiority.

Harry decided he'd better nip that sort of attitude in the bud. "Helen, if anyone's uncomfortable with it—boy or girl—you should try to be understanding and encouraging, not criticize them. It would have been really hard for me when I was your age."

Abashed, she nodded. She was about to say something when Hedrick tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to face him, and he quickly stepped up to her and hugged her, obviously taking her by surprise. She gave a mild start, then slowly put her arms around him. Harry and his friends all exchanged smiles. He couldn't see Hedrick's face, but he could tell that Helen seemed genuinely pleased.

The hug lasted a few seconds longer than Harry expected, then they broke off from each other. "See, that wasn't so hard," said Hedrick, smiling in mild embarrassment.

"No, it wasn't," agreed Helen.

"It gets easier the more you do it," said Pansy, with a wide smile. "We can work on it some more this weekend."

"Okay," said Hedrick. "Ron, could you do some flying with us this weekend, too?"

"Sure," agreed Ron. "How about tomorrow morning at ten?"

"Okay, we'll tell the others. Thanks."

"Yes, thank you," Helen said to Ron. Turning to Hermione, she said, "And thank you, Hermione, for what you did yesterday. All of you, of course."

"No, it was mostly Hermione," said Ron. "But you're going to have to start calling her 'Professor Granger.'"



Helen and Hedrick looked at Hermione in surprise; Hermione nodded with pleasure. "I'm going to teach Transfigurations next year, but Professor McGonagall wants me to take over a few classes now. One of them will be yours."

"That's great," said Helen enthusiastically, as Hedrick nodded. "Wow, I wonder if there's ever been two students who were professors before."

"I don't think there's even been one," said Hermione, who Harry assumed must have looked it up at some point.

"And never two students who had phoenixes, either," added Hedrick, obviously impressed. Harry and Hermione glanced at each other, both embarrassed.

"We should go," said Helen to Hedrick. "Let them get on with their studying."

Hedrick turned to leave, then thought of something else. "Oh, was that really the Minister of Magic in here earlier?"

Helen shrugged apologetically. "We were going to come earlier, but we looked at the map, and..."

"Yes, that was him," said Harry. "There was some stuff he wanted to talk to me, to us about. I'm afraid I can't tell you what it was, though."

Hedrick and Helen nodded. "See you later," said Helen, and they left.

Harry chuckled. "Meeting the Minister probably seems much more impressive to them than it does to us." He paused, then added, "I wonder if it would seem more impressive to me if it wasn't for the fact that the first time I saw a Minister of Magic, he was having Hagrid hauled off to Azkaban."

"Yes, that did put sort of a damper on it," agreed Ron. Anticipating no further interruptions, they took out their books and started studying.

Harry and Hermione left the Great Hall on Monday immediately after finishing lunch, heading for the staff room. He glanced at her as they walked; he could see excitement and anticipation on her face. He felt like teasing her, but just decided to let her enjoy the moment. As they approached the staff room, Flora

suddenly appeared, and settled on Hermione's shoulder; Hermione smiled and reached up to pet her. Fawkes appeared a few seconds later, and perched on Harry's shoulder as he opened the door.

He entered, followed by Hermione. The only staff members missing from the room were Trelawney, Svengard, and of course, Hagrid. Upon seeing Hermione, everyone except Snape broke into applause, which a smiling Harry quickly joined. McGonagall stepped forward and extended a hand. "Welcome to the staff room, Professor Granger."

Beaming, Hermione shook it. "Thank you, Professor, and thank you, everyone. I'm so happy to be here."

Sprout walked up to Hermione and took both of Hermione's hands in hers. "We're very pleased to have you, dear. I imagine we all thought at one time or another we'd see you in here one day. It's just sooner than we thought, due to Minerva's desire to take it easy."

Harry and a few other teachers chuckled. "I would explain in detail how much work is involved in being headmistress," said McGonagall casually, "if I thought you were serious. Professor Dumbledore simply made it look easy."

"Did you have any classes this morning?" asked John, as Harry sat on the sofa, Hermione next to him.

"Yes, I had second year Hufflepuff/Slytherin. It went fine. I was a little nervous, but it helped that they were Harry's Slytherins, so they knew me, and were being nice." Harry couldn't help but glance at Snape when she referred to the Slytherins as being his, but Snape had no visible reaction.

"How did they become 'Harry's'?" wondered Sprout.

"It's just what we call them," explained Hermione. "Harry sort of bonded with them at the beginning of last year, when he showed them how they could overthrow Malfoy."

John chuckled. "You make it sound like a coup d'etat."

“It was, really,” said Hermione, as Harry wondered what the phrase meant. “Malfoy ruled the Slytherin common room because no one dared to stand up to him. Harry explained that it was a matter of them sticking together, like we have to stick together to fight Voldemort. They did, and it worked. They’ve been a very tight group ever since.”

“From adversity comes strength,” commented Dentus. “I assume from knowing his father that he was roughly the local bully. What made them do it? First years are usually kind of timid, especially at first.”

“They liked Harry, and his class,” said Hermione. “You don’t know this, but the other teachers would. Malfoy always hated Harry, and he couldn’t deal with anyone in Slytherin contradicting him. He tried to bully them into silence, but it didn’t work, and the other students started resisting once they saw it could be done.”

“Very interesting,” mused Dentus. “It’s like a microcosm of what was happening in the real world. Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind when teaching the second years. I may be able to give them some historical examples that’ll remind them of what they did.”

“And so, Harry became their hero even before he became everyone else’s,” said Sprout, with an amused glance at Harry.

“Professor Sprout,” said Harry to Hermione, “does in here what Pansy usually does with the six of us, she’s the most likely to tease me about my status and my reactions to it.”

“What status do you mean, Harry?” asked Sprout perfectly innocently, as if she wasn’t sure what Harry was talking about.

Harry chuckled. “Yeah, right.” To Hermione, he said, “Now she’s trying to embarrass me by getting me to say what it is.”

Sprout shrugged, as if to suggest she couldn’t be blamed for trying. “He’s getting smarter,” she said to Hermione. “Last year, he’d have fallen for that. Of course, last year he’d have fallen for almost anything. They grow up so fast.”

“Kingsley said the same thing a few months ago, the first time I beat him dueling.”

Flitwick whistled. “That really is impressive, beating the strongest Auror before your seventeenth birthday. How do you do against him now?”

“I win about a quarter of the time, I guess. He says I’ve still got a few years until I catch up to him on skill.”

“Really, Harry,” said McGonagall, deadpan, “it’s so unlike you to boast.”

Harry looked at Hermione to see her grinning; she obviously enjoyed seeing McGonagall tease Harry. “I mentioned it because it’s funny that both she and Kingsley would say the same thing. It’s as if I’m a child, with you and with the Aurors.” His tone made clear that he wasn’t bothered, just making an observation.

“In a way you are,” said John. “You’re a prodigy, really, manifesting far-above-adult-average abilities when not yet an adult, not only with your courage, but with your strength and the energy of love, which aren’t the same but are related. Prodigies get thrust into the adult world before they’re ready for it, in most cases. You weren’t quite ready for it, but weren’t far from it, and you’ve adapted well. It doesn’t mean you’re a child, of course, just as close to one as will ever be in this room. Fortunately,” he added with a smile, “if you’re a child, you’re a cuddly one, not a bratty one.”

Harry chuckled. “Thanks. Good thing this didn’t happen in fifth year, though. I’d have been pretty bratty.”

“I confess, Harry,” said McGonagall seriously, “that I questioned Professor Dumbledore’s decision to make you a teacher even when he did. I did not doubt your ability to do the job well, but was concerned about your maturity. He responded that he was confident that you would grow into the job, and as usual, he was correct.” With a small smile at her own expense, she continued, “Most of the times I questioned his judgment I was wrong, but he preferred that I do so anyway. He said it ‘kept him on his toes.’”

“I always felt,” said Flitwick, “that he was very much on his toes, all the time.”

“Not always,” said Sprout. “There was that unpleasantness two years ago...”

“Could he really be blamed for that?” asked Hermione.

“He thought so,” said Harry. “He said he shouldn’t have let it come to that.”

“Unfortunately, he was correct,” put in Dentus. “Had he stayed better connected politically, he would have had sufficient warning, and avoided what happened. He was somewhat complacent, though, having run Hogwarts for so many years without outside interference, and we all know he preferred to stay away from the muck that politics often is. Instead, he got caught with his wand in his pocket.”

“What?” asked Harry.

“The Muggle equivalent,” explained John, “would be, ‘he got caught with his pants down.’”

“Ah,” said Harry.

“What a lovely metaphor,” said McGonagall dryly. “It is fortunate that wizards need not wear pants.”

“Anyway, Harry,” said Dentus, “there was a little object lesson for you in that, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“No, I actually noticed. It’s the kind of thing you usually say, just with a very clear illustration of the dangers.”

“Well,” said McGonagall, “fortunately I have the same political advisor that Harry does, so we may hope that such a thing will not happen again for quite some time. Not to mention a Minister of Magic who knows which way is up.”

“Yes, it does seem as though this one’s a keeper,” agreed Sprout. “Is he as good as he seems, Professor Dentus? You know him, after all.”

“It depends on whether you mean, good person, or good politician,” said Dentus. “A good politician, definitely. A good person... that’s a lot harder to tell, in a politician. I don’t know him well enough to know that.”

Sprout nodded. “I suppose it’s not always easy to know that, even in someone who’s not a politician.” After a pause, she glanced at Harry and Hermione on the sofa, phoenixes on their shoulders. “I’m just wondering, is there some reason you have them with you like this? Or is one here because the other is?”

“Well, most of the time when they’re with us like this, it’s because they decided, not us,” explained Harry. “But I do know why they’re here now.” Hermione glanced at him in surprise; clearly she didn’t know. “Flora is here because Hermione is very excited to come into the staff room. The feeling attracts her, she wants to be closer to Hermione while Hermione feels it. Fawkes came partly because he and Flora like to be together while Hermione and I are together, and partly because he likes it when Flora feels like she feels because of Hermione.”

“Spreading joy throughout the phoenix world,” joked Sprout. “So, does any of this spill over onto you, Harry?”

“I wondered that myself, actually,” said McGonagall seriously.

Harry thought about it. “It’s hard to say, because I’d know that Hermione was excited even without them, and I’m happy for her. So, it’s spilling over onto me in the way normal for humans. It’s not easy to tell if the phoenixes are affecting it or not.”

“Do they ever interact physically when they’re together?” asked John. “Like, engage in grooming behavior, things like that?”

“Not really, no,” answered Hermione. “Their interaction is more mental than physical. The closest they get to that is that sometimes they stand right next to each other.”

“How’s your communication coming along?” asked Sprout.

“Slowly but surely,” said Hermione. “I don’t think it’s as good as it’s going to get, but it’s good. For me, it’s just a matter of getting used to it. It helps to have

Harry and Fawkes around, though. A few times we've done this thing where we tested my ability to get things from Flora. Harry comes up with something—an image or an impression, the kind of thing he knows phoenixes communicate. He sends it to Fawkes, who sends it to Flora. She sends it to me, and we see if I get the same thing Harry sent. Usually I do, and I know it's from Harry. Flora sends an image of Harry, a particular one with Fawkes on his shoulder, that's her way of letting me know it's from him. Lately, Harry's been doing it partly as a way of teaching me phoenix shorthand, the kind he learned from Fawkes. It also teaches Flora, which is nice, since I'm her first companion."

"That sounds fascinating," said Sprout. "Would you do one for us? Harry, whisper to Minerva and I what you're going to try to communicate before you do it."

He did, then focused on what he wanted Fawkes to relay. There was silence in the room for a minute, then Hermione spoke. "I think it's just that we have Potions with Professor Snape on Wednesday."

Harry nodded to her, as McGonagall and Sprout looked impressed. To the others, he explained, "I sent the shorthand for two days, which is two sunsets, and an image of Professor Snape in the Potions dungeon."

"Could you have done it by sending only the image of the Potions dungeon," wondered Flitwick, "or only an image of Professor Snape?"

"Yes, it would just be a different emphasis. The first one would have emphasized the class, and the second, that it was Professor Snape who was teaching it. The way I sent it, they're kind of equally emphasized. But the second could also have meant that I, she, or we would meet Professor Snape in two days; it's only the fact that we know we have him for Potions that would make it mean what it does."

"Would you do another one?" asked Sprout.

"Okay," agreed Harry. He thought for a minute, then walked over to Sprout and McGonagall and whispered to them. They looked surprised as he took his seat and began focusing.

This one took a little less than a minute; Hermione looked at him with surprise. “Are you saying that I shouldn’t worry about the Ravenclaws in tomorrow’s seventh year Transfigurations class?”

Again, Harry nodded. “That was what he said, almost exactly,” said McGonagall.

“But how did you know that I was worried about that?” she asked, in mild disbelief. “Not only didn’t I tell you that, I didn’t tell anyone!”

“Well, Flora knows,” pointed out Harry. “Of course, phoenixes don’t understand things in the same terms we do. She doesn’t know exactly what it is you’re concerned about, she just knows you’re concerned. Very recently, I think while we were eating lunch, I got an image of you in front of a class, with lots of the Ravenclaw students in it, and a feeling of anxiety. I assume it means that you’re worried that the Ravenclaws won’t necessarily respect you as a teacher, or look for ways to test you, prove to them that you’re qualified.”

“I’m impressed that you worked that out,” said Hermione. Harry chuckled, as did a few teachers. “I don’t mean that, that you’re so slow you couldn’t have,” she protested. “It just doesn’t seem like that much information.”

“I should understand, I felt that way a bit when you roped me into doing the D.A. in fifth year. There were a few students who were older than I was, so it’s no surprise that I’d feel like that.”

McGonagall nodded understandingly. “I think most of us have felt that way when we started, Hermione. Well, except Archibald, perhaps. Most of us don’t start in our sixties.”

“No, I was actually worried that Hermione would poke holes in my historical knowledge,” said Dentus, with a small grin. Most everyone laughed, as an embarrassed Hermione smiled at Dentus.

“I think most of us have felt that way about Hermione,” agreed Sprout. “I don’t think you have much to worry about from the Ravenclaws, dear. Harry, how did you send the message you did?”



“I just sent back the same image, with emotional impressions of calm and confidence.”

“Fascinating,” marveled Sprout, as a few others nodded. “But it does raise some privacy issues, doesn’t it?”

Harry and Hermione exchanged a knowing smile. “I became his Legilimency practice partner shortly before Professor Dumbledore died,” said Hermione. “So there’s not many privacy issues with us anyway.”

Harry noted many teachers’ surprised looks. “Besides, it’s not like they’re going to be exchanging information on us all the time. I think Flora sent that one along because she recognized it as something I might be able to help her with, maybe make her feel better about. She definitely wasn’t gossiping.”

“I don’t think Professor Sprout was suggesting that either Fawkes or Flora acted inappropriately,” pointed out Flitwick. “Just that as a general matter, such a close connection could cause complications. Then again, given that only one out of every how many thousand wizards become phoenix companions, the chances that two people as close as you would be chosen must not be high. I wonder if there have ever been any married companions.”

“Or, as this situation is close to, partnered phoenixes companioning married people,” suggested Sprout.

Hermione shook her head. Harry had read this in *Reborn From the Ashes* as well, but he decided to let her answer the question. “The only companions who have ever been married were ones who met after they became companions, usually much later in life. There’s nothing in the literature about how closely connected the phoenixes themselves were. But yes, our situation is probably as close as it gets to that. It should be interesting.”

As McGonagall changed the subject, asking Hermione more detailed questions about the class she’d taught, he imagined himself and Hermione fifty years older, sitting in the headmaster’s office talking, phoenixes on their shoulders. A few seconds later, she glanced over at him with a slightly surprised look, and he

wondered if Fawkes had sent that image over. Then he wondered how Fawkes would decide what to send and not to send, and he understood that he had to trust Fawkes's judgment. He knew he trusted it a lot more than he did his own.

## CHAPTER 14

### THE EMPTY DORMITORY

Four weeks later, Harry and Ron walked across the Hogwarts grounds, just having finished an hour-long fly. “Oh, I miss Quidditch,” said Ron wistfully, for what Harry guessed was the twentieth time in the past two months. Still, Harry felt he couldn’t blame Ron.

“Me, too,” he agreed. “At least McGonagall says the new stadium is being built on schedule, so it’ll probably be finished in January.”

Ron didn’t look very reassured. “I don’t see why they don’t at least let us practice. There’s plenty of airspace, even if we don’t use what’s above where the stadium should be.”

Harry glanced at him in surprise. “I thought you agreed that practicing wouldn’t be the same without a proper set of hoops.”

Ron appeared mildly chagrined that he had ever said such a thing. “That was before going two months without any Quidditch. I’m really starting to feel it now, since this is about when we’d be playing our first match.”

Harry shrugged. “I know. But as I’m sure you know, I can’t pick the Slytherins’ team without hoops, and it’s not fair for them not to have a team while the rest of us practice. And before you say anything, I’m aware of the irony of talking about what’s fair to the Slytherins.”

“Just so long as you’re aware of it.”

“How are the second years doing with their flying, by the way?”

“Not bad,” said Ron, with some pride. “They’re getting the hang of it, and they’re surprisingly disciplined for a bunch of second years. I have to admit that I was just sort of humoring them when I started, but it’s turned into kind of a nice

project for me. I've spent some of the last few Saturdays in the library researching broom-based battle information, which of course Hermione had some fun with me about. Like, that seeing me in the library is like seeing her on the Quidditch pitch."

"I can understand that," said Harry. "You'd probably say the same thing if she suddenly started flying for fun."

"I probably would," conceded Ron. "Anyway, I'm getting pretty interested in the whole concept of combat flying, probably because there are elements of it that are a little similar to the kind of flying you do in Quidditch. And since I'm Quidditch-starved right now, this is the next best thing."

"Funny, I was planning on starting to teach it the week after next, and starting to research it myself later today. You could point me to the right books. Then again, I could just turn the class over to you for that."

"Hadn't thought of that," said Ron. "I suppose you could, since I've been teaching the second years. Of course, you should research it and know it anyway, but if you want me to demonstrate something or teach it, sure, I wouldn't mind. D'you want to go to the library and get started now?"

"No, not now, though I am going there. Hermione and I are going to do our Legilimency practice in a few minutes."

Ron nodded. "So, how's that going?"

"Pretty good," replied Harry, as they approached the castle entrance. "I feel like I'm getting better all the time. I'm improving both at viewing memories and discovering lies. Hermione and I are doing this thing lately where we always check each other, and we deliberately lie to each other every now and then, as a test to see if the other person catches it. But it can't be something the other person would know was a lie anyway. Like, I said I was taking the N.E.W.T.s very seriously, and she just looked at me like, you have to do better than that."

"Hard to think of anyone who needs N.E.W.T.s less than you," agreed Ron. "In the library, Hermione's always telling me I should study more Herbology or Transfigurations, to prepare for the N.E.W.T.s. To be honest, she's probably right,

since in the winter and spring there'll be lots of Quidditch practice. She must have gotten through to Pansy, though, because Pansy's really serious now about studying. She's usually been so-so about it, like the rest of us except Hermione, but she's spending a lot of time in the library too."

"I hadn't known that in particular," said Harry, "but I had noticed that when we study together in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, she seems pretty focused on the books. I just assumed she was always that way, since we'd never studied with her before."

"I don't think so," said Ron. "I don't have the impression that they were very big on studying." Harry understood that 'they' referred to Malfoy and whoever else studied with him; he couldn't imagine that Crabbe or Goyle ever actually studied.

"I assume that's something you'd prefer not to think about," said Harry.

The look on Ron's face told Harry that he had made a vast understatement. Glancing around to make sure they weren't being overheard, he said, "Don't get me wrong, I love her and I know she's totally changed. And I'd never say anything about it, because I know how it affects her. But you could say it was a bit of a hurdle to get past when we got together. So, yes, I really do try not to think about it." Harry guessed that Ron was admitting that the length of time it took for he and Pansy to become a couple was at least somewhat affected by that consideration. Given how close Pansy had been to Malfoy, Harry found he couldn't blame Ron at all.

They entered the library and found Hermione at a table in front of her usual pile of books, Pansy opposite with a much smaller pile. Subtly putting a hand on Pansy's shoulder and keeping his voice down so as not to draw the attention of Madam Pince, Ron said, "Hi, how's it going?"

She glanced up at them, putting her hand on top of his. "Not bad. You know, hard as usual. Except for Harry's class, of course, which is pretty easy."

“Glad I could help,” responded Harry. “It’s all part of my plan to be an extremely popular teacher.”

“It seems to be working,” said Hermione. “I assume you’re here for...” She trailed off, not wanting to say the word ‘Legilimency’ at any volume. He nodded, and she picked up her books, put them into her bag, and got up as Ron sat next to Pansy.

“Where are Ginny and Neville?” asked Harry as they headed out of the library and towards Harry’s office.

“I think they’re studying in the common room,” said Hermione. “Neither needed to use the library especially.” Harry understood that most people preferred to study in the common room, as people could speak at whatever volume they wanted to. “Speaking of studying, it’s interesting how it works out. You have the easiest schedule, but because of teaching you’re the busiest. The only study-intensive classes you have are Transfigurations and Potions.”

“And I can take it easy in Transfigurations, since I’m a good friend of the teacher,” joked Harry.

“You were a friend of the teacher before, and it really didn’t matter,” she responded. “Anyway, it’s not me you have to worry about, it’s the N.E.W.T. I know, you don’t care especially, but I do hope you’ll at least manage an ‘Acceptable.’ If you become headmaster, it won’t look good to the students if you failed one of the important N.E.W.T.s.”

Harry was amused at the idea that Hermione would think of that. “I think most students didn’t know, and didn’t care, how many N.E.W.T.s Albus got. They probably just assumed he got a lot, like I did. Maybe if I’m headmaster, people will assume I got a lot, and not research it.”

She gave him a penetrating look. “I’m not trying to bother you, but I do wonder something... whenever it comes up about you being headmaster in the future, you seem kind of... I don’t know, solemn, maybe. My impression was that

you'd rather not think about it, or that you don't want to do it but think you will anyway. Am I right?"

They walked in silence as he mulled it over. Finally, he said, "The first, I guess. It's not so much that I mind the idea, it really is an honor. I think it's that I feel like being an Auror is what I want to do, and staying here is what I feel like I should do, the most logical thing to do. I remember talking to Ron after a fly, the day after Albus died. He said he was taking so long to let Pansy know how he felt because they were the only two of the six not paired up, and he wanted to be sure that if they did it, it was for the right reasons, not because it just seemed like the natural thing to do. I feel like if I decide to stay here, it should be because I want to, not because I feel like I should. If that makes any sense."

"I can definitely understand that," she assured him. "It is your life, after all. Maybe I shouldn't make jokes about it, that probably doesn't help."

"I don't think it matters," he said, as he opened the door to his office and saw Fawkes and Flora standing on his desk. "Hello, you two," he said, now smiling. Soon after Flora joined Hermione, the two phoenixes had taken to being present during Harry and Hermione's Legilimency sessions. "I bet I know what Fawkes would prefer I do."

She gave him a reproachful look. "You are joking, I hope. You know very well that he'd want you to do whatever made you happiest."

"I know," he said as they sat in their chairs. "I was mostly kidding. It's probably better to say that he'll be pleased if this is what I decide I want to do, since you and I would be spending a lot of time together."

"You should be completely kidding, since you know better." She opened his desk drawer with her wand, and the Pensieve floated out and landed at her side. She extracted a memory as usual, then asked, "So, who'll go first?"

"You go ahead," he said. "Are you going to try to view memories again?"

She nodded. "I want to keep working on that, it's good practice." He cleared his mind, and she pointed her wand at him. Soon he felt a memory playing in his

head, of events that occurred during the trial in early September of the previous year in which Voldemort had invaded Harry's dreams, prompting him to find the first of the energy-of-love spells. After fifteen minutes, she changed her focus, and moved ahead to the first Hogsmeade weekend of that year. Harry remembered his conversation with Professor Dumbledore the day before the first Quidditch match. As he felt Hermione view it, he was again impressed by the fact that she could view it in much better detail than he could remember it himself. She quickly glanced at their lunchtime conversation and their lesson with Professor Dumbledore, and viewed in more detail his later conversation with Pansy. A few minutes later, Hermione put down her wand for a break.

"You really didn't take her very seriously, about her warning," she gently chided him. "It's interesting how I get your emotional perspective from these memories. I guess it's more accurate to say that you didn't take the threat seriously, you were sure there was nothing Malfoy could do to you."

He shrugged. "I wasn't really thinking about artifacts."

"It's that, but also that you didn't take threats very seriously in general. Ironically, now you do—at least, more than before—but there's quite a bit less that can threaten you."

"Probably artifacts, mostly," agreed Harry. "Not that I couldn't be killed any other way, but of course I've been studying lots of defenses against advanced Dark magic, both from books and working with Snape. I think I could deal with most of what they could throw at me. But it's hard to defend against artifacts. Like, what would I do against a Confundus Beam?"

"There must be some way to defend against it," said Hermione. "I guess I should try to research artifacts, at least the known ones, and defenses against them."

"No, I should do it. You're really busy now, especially since you're teaching ten hours a week as well as taking nine classes. Not that I'm not busy, but as you pointed out, I don't have that much homework."



“Well, I won’t argue with you, but maybe I’ll help you find the books, get started. So, are you ready to continue?”

Harry nodded, and she pointed her wand at him again; again he was calm, not resisting. After a minute of searching, she found where she had left off, at the point just before she had entered the room that day a year ago. In his mind, Harry saw Hermione proudly display and explain the new maps, and recalled how impressed he’d been. Then he saw Pansy ask Hermione why she’d never fallen in love with him, and Hermione’s answer. As she answered, in his memory, he recalled what he had been thinking: that part of the reason he hadn’t thought of her romantically was her bossiness and tendency to control, that he wouldn’t want to live his life dealing with that. In the present, he saw her face fall, and realized with a start that she was experiencing the memory as he was. She put down her wand and withdrew from his mind, then looked off to Harry’s left, her expression crestfallen.

He felt awful, but he paused, not knowing what to say. Tears came to her eyes, and in seconds she was sobbing, her head down. He wanted to hold her, but felt as though he shouldn’t, considering that it was he who had caused her distress. The phoenixes showed no reaction; Harry wondered what they were thinking.

Finally, he felt he had to say something. “Hermione, I’m so sorry—”

Through her sobs, she cut him off with a gesture. She started making an obvious effort to rein in her emotions. “It’s not your fault,” she said through the last of her tears. “We all have our thoughts, you can’t blame yourself for that. Besides, you were right.” As she said that, new tears seemed to threaten. “Most men wouldn’t want that. I was lucky you and Ron put up with me being like that, even as a friend.”

“Oh, come on, that’s not true,” he protested vigorously. “It’s not like Ron and I didn’t have our things that annoyed you. We all have things like that, at least I assume we do. I know I do, you know how unpleasant I was to deal with in fifth year, for example. Looking back on that, I could easily wonder how you put up with me. It wasn’t a very nice thing of me to think, I just...”

“Never thought anybody would see what you thought,” she finished for him. She paused a minute, her immediate emotional reaction having passed. Harry waited for her to speak, as she obviously had more to say; he fervently hoped that his friendship with her wouldn’t suffer because of what had happened.

“I want to lie to you, and just say, ‘it’s okay, don’t worry about it,’ but I couldn’t really lie to you anyway,” she said.

He knew she wasn’t finished, but cut in before she could continue. “Hermione, I’m hardly going to be checking you right now.”

“I know, but you know it happens automatically sometimes in emotional situations, which this is,” she pointed out. “Anyway, it hurts, I’m not going to deny that. And not because of some idea that I had a chance at you and missed it, of course. It’s just because it’s so true. It bothered Neville, even though he didn’t say anything about it until the Skeeter thing happened, and he knew I was like that beforehand. It also hurts because it was one of the main things Skeeter used to hurt me, it very much has that association.

“But you have a right to your thoughts, and you shouldn’t feel bad about it. That this happened is just because of what we’re doing; humans aren’t used to sharing their thoughts like phoenixes do. If you think something, you assume it’ll go no further, and that’s reasonable. You know I’ve read a few books about Legilimency; one of them said that doing what we’re doing is much more intimate than being naked around someone, in some ways more intimate than sex. We don’t tend to think about that aspect of it much, but it is true. It could destroy a relationship fast unless the people make efforts to make sure that it doesn’t happen. That’s another reason I didn’t put you off and say everything was all right; you’d know soon enough that it wasn’t, and it would just be worse. It can take the same kind of effort that maintaining a married relationship can take. We have to face up to that, and this is a good example of why.”

He shook his head. "I'm sure you're right, I just don't feel like I'm good at dealing with this kind of thing. I mean, I'm still stuck on, 'I'm really sorry.' I feel terrible that I even thought that—"

"It was true. You can't keep apologizing for something you thought, something that was true."

"Maybe that's what I mean when I say I'm not good at dealing with it. It's hard to think about anything but that I feel bad for hurting you."

"Harry, do you want to help me?" she asked, raising her voice a little. "You can help me, or you can sit there feeling bad that I got hurt. It's up to you."

He felt as though she'd slapped him in the face, but it got his attention. "I'm sorry, I'll try." He focused on the situation, trying to be as rational as possible. After a minute, he said, "I do understand what you mean. You're right... I knew this was intimate, but I never really thought about it like this. I guess I only thought of it being intimate in a good way, like when we see memories of our friendship, how we love each other."

She nodded a little. "That's understandable, since there's far more of that kind of thing, and we tend to seek it out anyway. This is the kind of thing that comes up by accident. Harry... this doesn't matter, but I feel like I'm going to wonder if I don't ask you. Was that just a passing thought, or was it something you'd thought about consciously, more than once?"

Embarrassed but determined to be honest, he searched his memory. "I'm pretty sure that until that point, I'd never had a conscious thought like that. I guess when I had the thought, I assumed that it was the unconscious reason I'd never thought of you that way. Well, that's not true, obviously I'd thought about it. I don't think you could be friends like we were and never have thought about that. It's just that most of the time I was way too young, or focused on Cho, then worried about the idea of having a girlfriend. If I thought about it, it was a passing thought, and I never thought, 'oh, no way, because of such-and such.' It was more like, it didn't enter my mind much at all. I mean, at that point, I had barely thought about Ginny

in that way either. It was your getting together with Neville that made me start thinking about having a girlfriend in the first place.”

“I can understand why. And I’m sorry I was checking you.” He had noticed, but decided not to say anything. “I was just afraid you might lie to me to spare my feelings, it would be a natural impulse if you’d had more of those kind of thoughts.” She shook her head as if angry with herself, then continued, “This really shouldn’t bother me, especially not this much. I love Neville, and I wouldn’t trade him for anyone, including you. I’m not the same anymore, at least, I’m trying not to be. And it was just a passing thought.” She looked at him, with a small smile, her expression a mix of emotions that seemed to include sadness and vulnerability. “So, do you think I can talk myself out of feeling bad?”

Already highly emotional because of what had happened, he felt intense sympathy for her, followed quickly by an equally intense feeling of love, stronger than he had ever felt before except for Ginny. Memories of their friendship flashed through his mind, all they had gone through together, suffered together, celebrated together. He knew how lucky he was to have her in his life. He looked at her, wanting her to know how he felt, and on an impulse silently asked Fawkes to send what he was feeling to Hermione through Flora.

A few seconds later, she smiled, and he could tell from her face that his message had been received loud and clear. She stood and hugged him; he held her tightly, pouring his feelings into it. “Thank you,” she said, now holding him equally tightly. “I think I knew you felt that way, but actually feeling what you’re feeling is a different thing altogether. It’s so strange... I can feel how much you love me, how important I am to you.” She paused, then added, “Well, I think you managed to talk me out of feeling bad, even without saying anything.”

He smiled, wondering if it would be transmitted and she would feel it though she couldn’t see it. “It’s the energy of love.”

She chuckled, continuing to hold him. “It really is. And there’s something I want to say to you.” He waited for her to continue, but she said nothing. Instead, he

received an impression from Fawkes, a feeling of love similar to the one he'd sent out, along with an image of Hermione and Flora. The feeling was slightly different from what he would feel; he guessed that each person's feelings of love would feel a bit different, like voices or handwriting were different. One impression he got strongly from what she sent was that she felt connected to him in a way that she felt was very special. Not like a married relationship, but closer than even a close friend. He wasn't sure there was a word for it, but he knew he felt it too. He sent what he was feeling through Fawkes.

"Thank you," she said, her voice heavy with emotion. She gave him a last squeeze, then let go of him and sat back down, which he did as well. "I wasn't sure you felt exactly that way about me, I'm glad that you do. It certainly makes what happened before seem very minor by comparison."

"I'm glad," he said. "I guess it's just one of the dangers of Legilimency. Now I feel like I understand a little better what Professor Sprout was talking about a few weeks ago, when she mentioned that there could be privacy issues with Fawkes and Flora sending stuff back and forth. Of course, they're not going to send anything that might be hurtful to one of us, but just the idea that problems can happen when you don't have the normal privacy that people have."

"To tell you the truth, I had wondered if something like this might happen. One of the Legilimency books I read said that it's not at all uncommon for relationships to break down in the face of that kind of intimacy, whether they're romantic, friendship, or blood relationships. I like to think ours is stronger than most, but we can't be overconfident. Interestingly, I think part of what helps us is what you've been doing with Snape. You already got accustomed to a loss of your privacy, with the stress that goes with that. Making that mental adjustment is part of what's hard about this."

"You managed it pretty well, though," he pointed out.

She nodded her thanks. "Not that people can't, just that it's not easy. So, should we get back to it? I've done enough, you should practice now."

He agreed, and they started again. This time, he focused on trying to get into her mind through Occlumency barriers. They practiced for twenty minutes, then took a break, intending to go for ten more minutes before stopping. As they were about to start again, Harry's pendant blinked pink. Exchanging a look of mild surprise with Hermione, he answered it. "Pansy?"

"Hi, Harry. Can I talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Sure, I'm in my office with Hermione. Did you need to talk to me alone, or—"

"No, that's fine. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Harry's pendant stopped blinking. "That's interesting. I don't think she's ever called to ask to talk to me like that. I wonder what's up."

Hermione clearly had no idea. "Well, we'll find out in a few minutes. I guess we may as well stop now, then."

He nodded. "I don't know what made me think of this, but I wondered; are you worried that the time you spend teaching will affect your chances of getting ten Outstanding N.E.W.T.s?"

"It occurred to me, of course, and Professor McGonagall mentioned it to me the day before I started teaching, when we met to discuss the classes I'd be taking over. I'm not thrilled, obviously, but that's just the way it is. Even if they didn't need me for this, which they do, I'd do it anyway; it is good practice for next year. And... I'm sure you never thought you'd hear me say this, but now that I know what I'm going to be doing, it's less than crucial that I get all Outstandings. I still want it, of course, and I'll work as hard as I can to get it. But teaching has to come first."

"I guess that makes sense," he said. They were silent for a minute; Harry found himself wondering how it happened that a person, especially from such a young age, was motivated enough to spend so much time studying. He could barely be bothered to study enough to get acceptable marks, and he knew that there were far more students like him than like Hermione.

His train of thought was interrupted by a knock on the door. He and Hermione stood as he opened the door with his wand. Pansy walked in, followed by Thomas Dalton, the Slytherin sixth-year prefect. "Hi," said Thomas to Harry and Hermione.

They both greeted him, then Harry asked Pansy, "What's up?"

"There's a kind of a... situation," she started, looking uncertain as to exactly how to say what she wanted to say. "Thomas found out about it, and he came to me, but I'm not sure what to do either, so I wanted to talk to you. Both of you, I'm glad that you're here," she added to Hermione. "Not because you're teachers, of course, just because... well, I'll tell you after you hear what happened. First of all, I want you to promise not to repeat what we're going to tell you to anyone. Can you do that?" Harry nodded promptly; Hermione thought for a second or two, then did so as well. "Thomas, could you tell them what you told me?"

Thomas looked as though he wasn't happy about it, but spoke anyway. "I was looking for Blaise, I wanted to tell him something. This was about an hour ago, by the way. I figured he must be in his dormitory, so I thought I'd check there. I walked in and..." He took a deep breath, obviously uncomfortable. "Someone else was in there, they were... doing stuff. Robes off, underwear down, hands places... I'd rather not get a whole lot more specific, you get the idea."

Harry did, of course, but couldn't understand why Thomas appeared so bothered at a violation of the rules. "Well, it doesn't seem all that different from what goes on at the couples' places," he pointed out. "Why didn't they just go there? Or were they going to do more than that before they got caught?"

"There's one detail that Thomas hadn't gotten around to mentioning yet," explained Pansy. "The other person was a boy."

Harry and Hermione exchanged startled looks. "I don't know who it was," continued Thomas. "They were on a bed, and my coming in startled both of them. The other one seemed to be trying to hide, and he fell off the other side of the bed; I never saw his face. I saw enough," he added, with a look of disgust, "to know that

he was an older student, probably a fifth or sixth year. I'd hate to think it was one of my dormitory-mates. To be honest, I'm just as happy not knowing. I'd have been even happier not to have walked in at all. I really didn't want to see that."

"I can really understand that," agreed Harry. "Oh, my God..." His first thought was to recall that Blaise had asked him for a hug, and he couldn't help wondering whether Blaise asked him for reasons other than what Harry had assumed. He felt thoroughly uncomfortable, at both that particular thought and the whole situation in general.

"Well, the fact that they're both boys really isn't relevant from the standpoint of the rules being broken," said Hermione reasonably. "Thomas, what would you have done if it had been a girl he was with?"

Thomas and Pansy looked surprised at Hermione's cavalier attitude, and Harry was as well. "I would have left in a hurry, like I did this time. Then I would have found Blaise later and talked to him, told him to be sure never to do it again, maybe made sure he knew about the couples' places. But I sure as hell don't want to talk to him about this."

Harry could understand that, too. "Just out of curiosity, Thomas, why didn't you report him?"

Thomas shrugged. "I thought about it, before I talked to Pansy. He'd be expelled, just like that; I know Snape doesn't like him, he usually treated him worse than other Slytherins. And I know that as a prefect, I'm supposed to... but I know, well enough, anyway, what he went through from the other four, for six years. Snape let it happen, the school let it happen. I think the school owes him a break or two. I just would really rather not have anything to do with it. I mean... I know it's illegal, Harry, but if you offered to do a Memory Charm on me, I wouldn't say no."

"Sorry," he said, empathizing with Thomas once again. "But I see what you mean about not reporting him, I wouldn't disagree. This is his last chance to have a decent year, I don't want to see him expelled. But why in the world would he do that?"



“People experiment, Harry,” said Hermione, as if surprised he would ask the question. To his raised eyebrows, she rolled her eyes and added, “Okay, you didn’t and I didn’t, but some people do, when they’re teenagers. It doesn’t mean they’re gay, maybe they were just curious. It could be anything, we have no idea.”

Again, the other three seemed surprised at how casual she was about it. “I actually meant, why would he do it when he could be caught so easily,” said Harry.

“Oh. That, I don’t know,” she admitted.

“I think I know,” said Thomas. “He’s been the only one in that dormitory since April. Probably no one but him’s ever gone in there, I’d never done it before. It must be that he got so used to the idea that he just assumed that no one would ever go in there.”

“So, what do you two think should be done?” asked Pansy.

“First of all, we should tell no one,” said Harry firmly.

“But we have to tell McGonagall, don’t we?” asked Hermione. “I mean, we are teachers, and you’re a Head of House.”

Harry shook his head. “Pansy and Thomas didn’t come to us to report what happened to a teacher and Head of House. They came to us to get advice from friends. McGonagall might not expel him, but she would feel obligated to tell Snape, as Head of Slytherin House. Snape would want to expel Blaise; even if McGonagall wouldn’t let him, what he would then do is start spreading it around, making sure the whole school knew. Remember what he did to Professor Lupin four years ago. That would be the same as expelling Blaise; his life would be so miserable that he’d have to leave. Not to mention, it would mark him for the rest of his life. The wizarding community is a small one; it could even get put on those new Internet pages. Also, Thomas and Pansy came to us in confidence. If they’d wanted McGonagall to know, they’d have told her.”

Pansy nodded. “It’s not as though either of us is a friend of Blaise’s or anything. But I agree with Thomas, he’s suffered enough. He made a mistake, but

he deserves another chance. So, what do we do about him? Not say anything, and hope he knows not to do it again?"

Harry received an image from Fawkes, sent by Hermione, of Harry and Snape sitting in Snape's office. The meaning was clear: she was pointing out that Snape would probably find out anyway, through viewing Harry's memories. He sent back the image, letting her know with an emotional impression that she shouldn't worry about it.

"Someone should talk to him," said Hermione, "and Harry, I know you won't want to, but you're the best person to do it. Thomas already said he doesn't want to, I have no relationship with him, and Pansy... doesn't either." Harry knew that her pause indicated that Pansy was probably the least well suited of the three to talk to Blaise. "You've at least talked to him, he seems to have a certain respect for you. I think he'll listen to you."

"What would I say?" asked Harry, feeling at a loss. "Stop fooling around with boys?"

Hermione sighed impatiently. "Harry, the fact that it was a boy has nothing to do with it. There's not supposed to be any intimate physical contact anywhere in the school; the couples' places are a well-known and understood exception to that. Just be nice, explain that you're not going to tell anyone, you just wanted to make sure he understood that he's not supposed to do that, and tell him about the couples' places. Who knows, he might not even know about them."

"Hermione," said a surprised Pansy, "It's, uh, nice that you're so open-minded about this kind of thing, but there's no way that two boys are going to go to the couples' places. Even if they went separately, there's way too much risk of being caught. They wouldn't be seen inside the place, but everyone knows who the couples are. If people see someone new going into or coming out of one, they'll wait to see the other one leave, out of curiosity. If Harry suggested that, and Blaise did it, he'd be found out very soon."

“Yes, you’re right, I hadn’t thought of that,” admitted Hermione. “Well, Harry, just talk to him and make sure he knows not to do it. But please, don’t make an issue out of the fact that it was another boy.”

“Why not?” asked Harry incredulously. “How can you act like that doesn’t matter? I mean, it’s so...” He couldn’t think of a word, but made a bodily gesture to indicate revulsion. Glancing at Thomas and Pansy, he could see that they agreed with him, especially Thomas.

“Harry,” she said earnestly, “What if it had turned out that I liked girls? Would you have not wanted to be my friend anymore, because of that?”

“But you wouldn’t have decided to—”

“People don’t decide that,” she said, her tone adding emphasis. “The Muggle world is discovering this, a lot faster than we are. I read a lot, Harry. Trust me when I say that some people are just this way naturally, they can’t control who they’re attracted to. Now, answer my question: if I liked girls...” She waited expectantly, eyebrows raised.

“No, of course I wouldn’t not be your friend,” he acknowledged. Nodding, she looked at Pansy, asking the same question without speaking.

Pansy looked discomfited. “Well, it would be weird, but yes, I agree with Harry. I think you know that, and that’s why you asked.” An unfamiliar thought flashed through Harry’s head, and he quickly realized that he had unconsciously used Legilimency on Pansy. He felt her feeling of revulsion at the thought of Hermione being attracted to women, and Pansy’s understanding that she would never have become friends with Hermione had she even suspected such a thing. He understood that Pansy had lied partly because she didn’t want to hurt Hermione’s feelings, and partly because it could provoke an argument with Hermione that Pansy didn’t want to deal with. Harry found he didn’t blame Pansy for lying, and hoped that Hermione didn’t get the same information he did.

Seeming not to have, Hermione nodded. “I certainly hope so, anyway. People usually start thinking differently, getting past the initial reaction, when it’s a

close friend or family member. They put more effort into understanding it. But for now, I'll just say one other thing: even if they could choose, there's nothing wrong with it, because it doesn't hurt anyone. Yes, it's... yucky, and my gut reaction about two women would be the same. But nobody's making us do anything we don't want to do. If they're not hurting anyone, they should be left alone to do what they want. If you ask Albus— well, if you could ask Albus," she quickly amended, because of Thomas's presence, "he would say the same thing."

Harry was having a hard time grasping this, as he had always simply assumed that it was wrong, and that was all there was to it. Thinking about it, he realized that this idea had mainly been passed to him by the Dursleys; he had agreed with it because of his visceral reaction to it. But he couldn't dismiss or argue with what Hermione had said, and she had a particular impact when she mentioned Dumbledore. Harry resolved to ask him that night.

"Well, they shouldn't do it in places they could be walked in on," pointed out Thomas.

"Yes, of course," agreed Hermione, "but that goes for normal couples too. You just would have reacted differently if it had been a girl with him."

"Yeah, I'd have said, 'good for him,'" said Thomas. "But this... sorry, Hermione, this is just too strange."

"I understand, it just takes time to get past that kind of reaction. Thanks for letting us know, Thomas. We can't give you a Memory Charm, but you don't have to think about it anymore."

Thomas nodded, understanding that he'd been dismissed. "I should get on back to the library," said Pansy. "You can help Harry with what he's going to say." She and Thomas left, and Harry and Hermione were alone again.

"How can you be sure that Snape won't do anything, if he finds out by viewing your memories?" she asked. "It's his House, he'll be furious at you, at all of us, for not telling him."

“Maybe, but he knows he can’t use this information,” argued Harry. “I asked him about this when he used the information he got from me to decide to kill Skeeter. He said he accepted the idea as a general principle, but that circumstances could cause exceptions to be necessary. This is definitely not like that, nothing important is at stake. He won’t like it, but he won’t do anything.”

Her face reflected her doubt. “I hope you’re right. Now, would you like some advice on what you should say to Blaise?” He just nodded, feeling that to say yes would be an understatement.

Two hours later, Hermione entered his office and sat down. “So, how did it go?”

“As well as could be expected,” he replied. “He was pretty scared. He thought that I wanted to talk to him as a professor; it took me a few minutes to convince him that it was unofficial, that I was just a student. I told him that he needed to be more careful, that other people can walk into the dormitories.”

“Did he say anything?”

“Surprisingly, yes, a lot, for him. He insisted, in kind of a panicked way, that it was the other boy who had ‘started it,’ as he put it. I told Blaise that I didn’t know who the other boy was and didn’t want to know, and he managed not to tell me. He just said—I should say that there was a point when he seemed to be trying to explain what had happened, not that I asked him. He kept pausing, saying a few disjointed words, interrupting himself, it was almost amazing I understood anything he said at all. What he seemed to be trying to get across was it was the other boy who initiated everything. Which I can believe, given Blaise’s personality; I can’t see him doing something like that. Basically, he said that the other boy started touching him, and it felt good, and one thing led to another. At one point, he said, ‘I’m not like that,’ as if it was important that I believe him. Also, he said, ‘no one’s ever...’ He didn’t finish that sentence either, but even I figured out what that meant.”

She nodded sympathetically. “He’d never had any sexual contact at all, so it was easy for him to go along with what was happening.”

“Yeah, but I hadn’t had any until late last year, and I wouldn’t have gone along with someone trying to do that.”

“No, most people wouldn’t,” she agreed. “I think what’s happened to him at Hogwarts comes into this somewhere. I mean, I don’t know—no one can know except him, and maybe not even him—but he probably had an overwhelming sense of helplessness. Whatever abuse Malfoy and the others dished out over the years was something he couldn’t control; he was at their mercy, at the mercy of his situation. He probably got used to the idea that he had no control, over anything. Things just happened. So, maybe it caused him to be very slow to say ‘no’ to anything in general, to assert himself.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know much about psychology, but what you say sounds like it makes sense. It sounds like you mean he had weak sales resistance.”

“Yes, I don’t think they have that phrase in the wizarding world, but that’s close to what I mean. I’m a little surprised you’re familiar with the phrase.”

“My uncle Vernon liked to say it about Petunia. He would say very approvingly that she had excellent sales resistance.”

“Not only sales,” muttered Hermione. Harry assumed she was referring to Petunia’s reluctance to help him a month ago.

“Do you think I did the right thing?” he asked. “I mean, telling Blaise not to tell me who it was. What if he approaches some other student the same way, maybe somebody younger...”

She shook her head. “That’s really unlikely. This only happened because Blaise has a dormitory to himself, which will never happen again. There’s just no opportunity for that sort of thing to happen. If we’re going to worry about what happens in dormitories, I’d rather worry about the kind of thing that happened to Blaise for six years.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I’ve wondered about that, how that was allowed to happen. I don’t wonder why Snape let it happen, he has this ‘the strongest will survive’ attitude. I do wonder why Albus let it happen. I mean, four sons of Death Eaters in one dormitory with someone like Blaise, it wouldn’t take a genius to figure out what would happen. Why didn’t he do something about it?”

“I’m not sure what he really could do,” said Hermione. “It’s hard to regulate what goes on behind the doors of a dormitory. There are magical monitoring devices which are the equivalent of Muggle cameras, but then you start getting into privacy issues, and you know how Albus would have been about that.”

“Yes, I know. But you’d think there was something he could do... warn Malfoy, something like that.” Harry knew he was grasping at straws, but he hated to think that the kind of abuse that Blaise had suffered couldn’t be prevented.

“He might have, for all we know,” said Hermione. “But the other thing you have to keep in mind is that the Head of House is ultimately in charge of what goes on in any House. Albus might not have wanted to step on Snape’s toes, so to speak, especially if there was little or nothing that could be done anyway. We know Snape didn’t care, but even if he had... Well, you’re a Head of House. If you thought four students in a dormitory were bullying and abusing the other one, what would you do?”

Harry thought about it for a minute. “I’d keep an eye on them, and ask the other teachers to do so also. One of the things we talk about in the staff room is what seems to be happening among the students. Between classes and seeing students in the corridors and in the Great Hall, the teachers have a pretty good idea of what goes on. If I thought there was bullying, I’d talk to the ones I thought were doing it, and ask them. I’d know if they were lying, of course, and—”

“But not every teacher can do Legilimency,” pointed out Hermione.

“Yes, but you asked what I would do. Anyway, if they lied, I’d tell them I knew they were lying, that bullying was unacceptable, and I’d warn them that if it continued, they would end up being expelled. And I’d do it, too. Not immediately,

I'd give them a few chances, a few owls to the parents. But eventually, if it didn't stop, I'd expel them."

She looked at him sympathetically. "I suppose you're thinking about when you used to get bullied by Dudley."

He nodded. "That stopped after I came to Hogwarts, of course, he was too afraid to do it then. But before then, there were plenty of times when I'd run for my cupboard, happy that it was so small that he couldn't get in there. So, yeah, you could say I'd be pretty strict about that."

"Is that something you think about much? Do you try to work out whether that's happening or not?"

"I don't know how conscious it is," he replied, "but I'm pretty sure that if there was any sign of it, I would've noticed. I don't see it much over the whole school, really. Based on last year, I might have wondered about a few of the Slytherin fourth and fifth years, but I don't see any signs this year. I wonder if it has to do with people trying to study the energy of love."

"It wouldn't surprise me," she agreed. "I've also noticed that things seem to be calmer than usual. I wonder partly if that's because Malfoy's gone, and so is his influence. Not that there are no bullies anymore, but they can't be so open about it."

Near the end of Hermione's sentence, Harry felt his hand tingle. Just as Hermione finished speaking, he heard Ginny say, "I'd like to talk to you when you're finished, no hurry." He relayed the message to Hermione, who got up. "I think we were almost finished anyway, tell her to go ahead." Harry gave Ginny the message and put down his hand. "I think you did fine with Blaise," Hermione assured him. "It wasn't easy, I would have been uncomfortable too. See you later."

Ginny walked in a minute after Hermione left, and gave Harry an enthusiastic hug and kiss. She sat down next to him and held his hand as she spoke. "It's strange... the way the privacy situation is, every moment alone with you is



precious, but after we've both graduated, it won't be. I wonder if we'll take it for granted after a while."

"At some point, I imagine we would," he said. Sensing that his answer seemed to have disappointed her, he added, "Not that it still wouldn't be important, of course. Just that, for example, if we couldn't eat for a few days we'd be starved, but it wouldn't mean that we... okay, maybe that's a bad example. But you know what I mean."

"You're not making me feel any better," she said teasingly. "I know you're right, of course. At some point you and I will be in the house doing different things, alone but not thinking about the other one especially, like Mum and Dad do now. But I still want us to be obnoxiously affectionate, even if it annoys the children."

"We could tell them it's important to the energy of love," he joked. "They'd believe me, since I'm the one that discovered it."

"Assuming we both make it that far."

He raised his eyebrows; it wasn't like her to be so pessimistic. "Are you thinking about the thing with the wasps?"

She shrugged dispiritedly. "Not just that, but the ones before, and the ones to come. I know, I shouldn't say that. That night," and he understood that she meant the night he told her he was in love with her, "I said we had to not think about the dangers, just dive into it. I was right, it's just hard to do all the time. Sometimes I feel like when we talk about the future, about children, we're just tempting fate."

He leaned over and put an arm around her shoulders, squeezing tightly. "I think we'll make it," he said reassuringly. "Somehow I just think we will."

She leaned against him. "I know, I'm sure you're right. Most of the time, anyway." After a minute of silence, she leaned over and kissed him. "I love you."

"I love you," he said.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be like this. There’s all these burdens on you, and sometimes I feel like I just add one more.”

He shook his head vigorously, and ran a hand through her hair. “You’re what makes all the burdens bearable. The others too, of course, but especially you.”

She smiled at him, conveying her thanks. After another minute, she asked, “How did the Legilimency go?”

He chuckled mirthlessly. “Funny you should ask that. She ran across a passing thought I had during a memory she was viewing, last year when she gave us the maps. I’d forgotten I’d thought this, but when Pansy asked Hermione why she’d never fallen in love with me, I thought that maybe I hadn’t thought of her that way because of how bossy and controlling she was.”

Ginny winced. “Oh, poor Hermione. I mean, the problem is, of course, that it’s not as though what you thought was unreasonable.”

“She said that too. But, still...”

She nodded. “It had to have really hurt. I bet she broke down.” He nodded, grimacing. She took his hand. “Funny, I feel sorry for you. More for her, of course, but it’s you I’m with right now. It must have made you feel really bad to feel responsible for hurting her like that, even though you really didn’t do anything wrong.” She looked at him in a way that suggested she was about to say something she didn’t want to say. “You know, sometimes I really envy Hermione. She has this connection with you that I can’t have. You can communicate through the phoenixes, know through them what the other one is feeling. You do Legilimency, which lets you get really close, like you know each other’s minds. Sometimes I... resent it a little, I feel bad that I can’t have that with you. I feel as though the advice Albus gave you, not to do Legilimency with me, wasn’t worth the loss of what I could have with you. But then something like this happens, and it reminds me again why he said that. I’m not sure I could deal with it if you had that kind of thought about me, and I found out about it.”

“I would never—”

“I know,” she interrupted him, squeezing his hand. “We haven’t really had a big fight yet. But we will get into fights, no couple never fights. I’d hate to accidentally run across what you were thinking during a fight.”

“Maybe the energy of love will stop us from getting into fights,” he half-joked.

She chuckled. “That would be nice, but I’m not holding my breath. So, are you and Hermione okay now?”

He nodded solemnly. “Fortunately, she doesn’t hold it against me. She kept saying I was right, which only made it worse. I think what made her feel better finally was, ironically... there was a lot of emotion in the situation, and I focused on how much I loved her, and sent her that through the phoenixes. That made her, both of us, I guess, feel better.”

“I can imagine,” responded Ginny with mild sarcasm. At Harry’s surprised look, she said, “Come on, Harry, I just got through telling you that I envied her that. What you did with her is exactly, exactly what I wish you could do with me. You didn’t necessarily have to tell me that, you could have just said you patched it up and everything was fine.”

He looked at her intently, puzzled. “Are you saying you don’t want me to tell you things?”

She sighed. “No, it’s just the timing. There are certain times when it may be better not to say certain things.”

“But how am I supposed to know which times those are? And also, if I start not saying things because I’m worried that it’ll upset you, then I’m afraid I may end up not saying things I should be saying. Does that make any sense?”

“I don’t know,” she said, frustrated. “Maybe you should just go ahead and say them, I’ll get upset sometimes, and you can learn that way.”

“Look, that’s not fair, you know I don’t want to upset you. But it’s like you’re asking me to read your mind or something—”

“It’s not reading my mind, it’s just understanding the situation, understanding how I’m feeling. Remember, Albus said that we have to be able to see through each other’s eyes, more or less, to be able to—”

She stopped talking as Harry’s pendant made a sharp noise, the one he had been taught meant that Bright had touched his ring, signaling that he was under attack. The particular tone meant that he was in his living room.

Harry had discussed with his friends what would be done in this situation; they had made it clear they wanted to be with him, as quickly as possible. Phoenixes would take them, but he would escort one person in his presence and close enough to him that he would lose no time in taking them. Ginny leaped out of her chair as Harry stood; they drew their wands and put their left arms on each other’s shoulders.

Instantly, they were in Bright’s living room. Bright and his wife were sitting on their sofa, and Killing Curses were headed for both of them; the one aimed at Bright clearly had been issued first, a half-second ahead of the other. Again acting as had already been discussed, Harry put up a shield around Bright while Ginny did so for his wife. Harry turned toward the source of the Curses, and saw Voldemort for a tenth of a second. As Harry whirled to face him, however, Voldemort disappeared with a popping sound. Harry managed not to vocalize his frustration that he had not only not caught Voldemort, but had not had a decent look at him to try to work out where he kept the device which allowed him to disappear when unconscious.

As Bright and his wife started to recover from their shock, Ron and Pansy arrived with Fawkes, and a second later, Neville and Hermione arrived holding Flora’s tail as two Aurors burst into the room. “Where are they?” asked one of the Aurors.

“He’s gone, it was just Voldemort,” said Harry, to the Aurors and his friends. After another few seconds, six more Aurors came through the front door,

including Kingsley; Harry knew that these had been the ready-status Aurors. One of the first two to arrive spoke into her pendant, giving the all-clear signal.

“It was only Voldemort, he Disappeared out,” reported Harry to Kingsley. “Two Killing Curses, one for each. Ginny happened to be with me; another half a second would have been too late. He Disappeared before I had a chance to do anything.”

Kingsley nodded his acknowledgment. “Minister, Mrs. Bright, are you all right?”

“I daresay I will be, once my heart returns to its normal rate,” said a shaken Bright. His wife just nodded. “He just Apparated in, as if he knew somehow exactly where we were in the house. Granted, the living room is a good guess, but... I just touched the ring reflexively. He sent the Curses at us very quickly, perhaps a second after he arrived.”

Kingsley looked at Harry. “You six, go to the meeting room near the detection area. I’ll be along shortly.”

Harry turned to head for the fireplace, but Bright spoke before he moved. Looking as though he wasn’t quite sure what to say, he paused for a second, then said, “Harry, Ginny... thank you very much.”

“No problem,” said Harry, as Ginny nodded. He walked to the fireplace, exiting after Ron and Pansy.

They had just sat down in the meeting room when Kingsley entered, followed by McGonagall, who Harry assumed had been taken there by Flora. Kingsley sat at one end of the table; McGonagall, the other. “First of all,” said Kingsley, looking at Harry and Ginny, “and needless to say, but... well done.”

“Thanks,” they said, in unison. “The fact that he left so quickly kind of surprised me,” added Harry. “Was that because I showed up, or do you think he was he planning to do that anyway?”

“It’s a good question,” said Kingsley. “We kept it a closely held secret that you would be guarding him, so Voldemort may not have known. He might have

suspected, of course, and done what he did partly to see whether it would get you there or not. But I see what you mean; that was the first time we've seen him run away from a fight before it even started. I doubt he would have run away if not for your showing up."

"I agree," said McGonagall. "I assume this means that Harry will have to create an anti-Apparation plot around the Minister's home."

"It looks that way," agreed Kingsley. "We had thought the one that was there might keep Voldemort out, but apparently not."

"I also wonder why he didn't try at night," said Harry. "When we started this, we talked about the fact that it would be the best time for him to try, since being asleep would slow me down by at least a second or two."

"We'll be wondering about that as well," said Kingsley. "We have to wonder whether this was a totally serious attempt, or an attempt at intimidation."

"I'll bet it seemed serious to Bright," put in Ron. "From what Harry said after we got here, he was a split second away from being dead."

"That's part of why I said 'totally' serious," said Kingsley. "Clearly he would have killed him if Harry hadn't shown up, but the point is that he probably could have done it in a way with a better chance of success. Unfortunately, we can't really know his motives, just take what may be poor guesses."

"So, if I put down a new plot, then the only way Voldemort can get to him at home is to overpower the Aurors."

"Yes," nodded Kingsley, "and that would give you plenty of time to get to Bright before he did, so it's rather unlikely he'll try that. No, after the new plot, I suspect that the Minister will be quite safe, at least from direct attack. We still have to worry about other things, like remote-control methods such as the wasps that almost got you, that kind of thing. Of course, that's not really your department."

"So, from now on," clarified Hermione, "he'll have to take Fawkes if he gets that signal."

“From the Minister’s home, yes,” said Kingsley. “He can still Apparate to the Minister’s office, where of course an attempt is much less likely.”

They talked for another ten minutes, and it was decided that Harry would put down the plot the next day at five o’clock, after his last class. McGonagall and the six decided to return to Hogwarts via the Owl Office fireplace, rather than use the phoenixes. When asked “What about safety?” by Ron, McGonagall’s deadpan reply was, “Oh, with the six of you around, I feel quite safe.” Ron nodded, acknowledging her point that any attack other than a major ambush was likely to fail against the seven of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Having been notified by McGonagall of what had happened, Snape summoned Harry to his office for a session twenty minutes after his return. Snape explained that he was planning to request a session later that evening anyway, so it was fortuitous that he would have the opportunity to view what happened.

After having taken the usual time to get in the proper state of mind, Harry entered Snape’s office and sat down. Snape started viewing, and put down his wand for a moment when he finished viewing both the incident and its aftermath. “Do you have any opinion,” asked Harry, “on whether it was ‘totally’ serious, like Kingsley mentioned?”

“Any opinion of mine would be no less speculation than yours or Mr. Shacklebolt’s,” said Snape. “Though I believe he feels there are more likely to be active guards at night, when the need for them is more clear. He did take something of a chance by simply doing what he did. I would speculate that he was confirming that you would come, and testing your reaction time.”

When no further comment was forthcoming from Harry, Snape resumed viewing Harry’s memories. He started with that day, viewing Harry’s Legilimency session and the emotional difficulties it caused. Then Pansy’s interruption, and her

and Thomas's entry and relating of what had happened with Blaise. Harry saw Snape's eyes widen and a scowl form, but he was silent and continued viewing. He then viewed Harry's conversation with Blaise, and put down his wand when it was finished.

Harry looked up to see Snape looking at him with considerable and undisguised anger; Harry was surprised, since Snape normally repressed such reactions even when the fact that he was having them was clear. "I shall leave for the headmistress the lecture about a teacher, a Head of House no less, who so flagrantly disregards the rules. I will, however, promptly expel Mr. Zabini, though not until he informs me of the identity of the other... perverted individual involved in this disgusting affair."

"You can't do that!" Harry almost shouted.

Now Snape did shout. "Do not presume to tell me what I can and cannot do!" Harry quickly reached for his wand and soundproofed the room. "Expelling both is what I absolutely should do, for the protection of the other students!"

"You don't give a damn about the protection of other students!" Harry shouted back. "If you did, you would never have let what happened to Blaise happen for six years!"

"And how do you suggest I should have prevented it?" asked Snape smugly. "If I had known he was a pervert, I could have informed the other Slytherins, who no doubt would have left him alone out of disgust."

"Yes, I'm sure they would have," said Harry sarcastically. "But you know very well you can't tell anyone, you can't use this information. You only got it from viewing my memories, you wouldn't have known otherwise. You just can't use any information you get from this."

"I have used such information before—"

"Yes, you gave me a Memory Charm and sent me to the restaurant so you could pretend to be me and kill Skeeter," interrupted Harry, his voice raised again. "I know that she knew too much and was dangerous, but it was still McGonagall's



decision. But this is nothing like that, and you know it. It isn't important to the Order, nothing is at stake from two boys touching each other in an empty dormitory. You wouldn't be this worked up if one of them had done the Cruciatus Curse on the other! It's only because you hate homosexuals—"

"Why are you arguing with me?" thundered Snape, who Harry feared was on the verge of losing his equilibrium. "It disgusts you! I could feel it in your memory! You find what they did disgusting, as well you should! You should be pleased that they'll be expelled!"

"I tried to do," said Harry, trying to calm himself, "what I thought Albus would have done. You know perfectly well that he wouldn't have expelled them. If I'd wanted them expelled, I would've gone to you myself. And yes, I do find it kind of revolting, but they didn't hurt anyone."

"Yes, they did; they hurt each other," snarled Snape. "If they are told that such behavior is acceptable, they will continue it, and it will harm all of society in the long run. There is a reason why such activity is viewed with disgust by wizarding society. Or perhaps you would like to see this occur in all dormitories, of all Houses?"

"I'd rather it was that than bullying," responded Harry. "Anyway, you can't expel them. You have to act as you would if you knew nothing about this."

"They will be expelled!" shouted Snape. "I will not have perverts in my House!"

"You can't expel them!" said Harry, raising his voice again despite his attempts not to. "You should never have known about this in the first place. The reason we do this, in case you've forgotten, is to keep you viable as a spy against Voldemort. That's the important part of all this. What happened today just isn't important, not in the big scheme of things. You would recognize that if you weren't so emotional about it."

Snape gazed at Harry coldly. "They will be expelled," he repeated.

Harry gave Snape an equally cold look in response. “You need McGonagall’s permission to do that, and I’m going to make sure you don’t get it. So if you want to expel Blaise, you’d better do it in the next five minutes. If you’d like to come with me to McGonagall’s office to make your case, fine. But I’m going.”

He waited for a second to see if Snape would follow or not. Finally, his face a mask of barely controlled rage, Snape stood. They walked out the door, into the Potions dungeon, and to McGonagall’s office.

Once there, Snape spoke first, giving what Harry knew to be a highly distorted and selective view of what had happened. Harry managed to interrupt only twice, though he knew he would get his turn. Finally, he did, and told his story, McGonagall listening silently.

“Professor Snape,” she said firmly, “I can very much understand why you wish to see them expelled, though I feel that expulsion is a rather harsh penalty for such a first offense—”

“We have no idea how many offenses may have occurred!” shouted Snape. “I must conduct an interrogation—”

“Professor Snape!” McGonagall stood and glared at him. “You indeed have quite an emotional view of this, if you have forgotten my well-known aversion to being interrupted.” Snape remained silent, though clearly furious. “I mean that it is a first offense for our purposes. You may recall that last year when Malfoy was being disciplined for the Quidditch incident, only established prior offenses were considered, even though we all understood he had committed many more. You did not object at that time.

“As I was saying, while I understand your wish to see them expelled, unfortunately, Professor Potter is correct. Information you receive from your arrangement with him must be considered confidential. It has no connection to the functioning of the school per se, but since I know about the situation, I must abide by these guidelines as well.”

She leaned over and stared at Snape, clearly trying to impress on him how serious she was. “You will tell no one of this, Professor. You will question no one, and you will act as you would have had you not known this.” She resumed her seat, looking at Snape appraisingly; Harry wondered if she was trying to decide whether Snape would follow her instructions.

Snape was still furious, but trying to control himself. “And what is to stop Zabini from turning the seventh year boys’ dormitory into a den of perversion?”

Harry cut in before McGonagall could answer. “Oh, come on, you saw my talk with him. The whole thing wasn’t his idea, and he was scared to death by being caught. There’s no way he’s going to do it again.”

“And supposing he decides he liked it?” Snape challenged him. “He was engaged in quite willful activity when he was walked in on.”

“I will place a monitoring device in the dormitory,” decided McGonagall, to Harry’s dismay. “It will record images only if anyone other than Mr. Zabini enters the dormitory, or if there is any magical activity. That should allay your concerns about any repetition of this incident.”

Snape looked as though he felt it was barely adequate, but it was too much for Harry. “We can’t just trust him not to do it again? I mean, Albus wouldn’t have done this, violated his privacy like this—”

“You just heard me say, Professor, that the device will only record if something unauthorized is happening. After what he did, he has forfeited any reasonable expectation of privacy; I think this is more than fair.” Harry didn’t think so, but held his tongue. “Professor Snape, you may go. I have a few more things to say to Professor Potter.”

Snape headed out, then paused at the door. “When you are finished, Professor Potter, I would like to finish the session we started.” After what had happened, Harry was surprised that Snape would want to, as he was clearly still very angry. Harry just nodded, and Snape left.

McGonagall regarded Harry solemnly. "I would like to know, Harry, why you did not tell me of this."

"Pansy and Thomas came to me in confidence," he said. "They didn't come to me because I'm a teacher, or a Head of House. They did it because they wanted advice from a friend, and they thought that since I had... well, not a relationship with Blaise, but as much of one as anyone does, that I could help."

"They may have come to you as a friend, but you cannot separate your roles as student, friend, teacher and Head of House so easily," she said. "You do have a responsibility to the school, to the welfare of the students. I admit I am concerned that this other student may attempt to do the same thing with a younger boy. I know, there will not be a similar opportunity, but I would still feel better at least knowing who it was. Failing to even allow Mr. Zabini to tell you the name was not in the best interest of Hogwarts."

"I would have let him tell me, maybe even asked him, but I didn't want Professor Snape to know. It's bad enough that he knows about Blaise, and I was mainly thinking about what he did to Remus at the end of the third year. Albus instructed him not to tell anyone about Remus, but he just disobeyed it, because he was angry. He's angry here, too. I don't have a lot of confidence that he's going to follow the instructions you just gave him."

"That is my worry, not yours," she informed him. "While I am not as... emotionally invested as Professor Snape in this kind of matter, I have enough difficulty in tacitly approving of encounters which take place in the couples' places. I am particularly disturbed at the idea of this kind of thing happening between students of the same gender."

"Albus wouldn't have cared—" he started to point out, but was quickly interrupted.

McGonagall stood, eyes ablaze. "I am *not* Albus!" Her voice was raised only a little above normal, but her tone and eyes made her anger clear. She glared at him for a few seconds, then seemed to recover herself, and sat back down. "That will be

all, Professor,” she said abruptly, looking at a document on her desk. Harry hesitated, understanding that he had made her very angry, but not completely understanding how he had done it. After a few uncomfortable seconds, he turned and left.

Walking away from her office, he wanted to talk to all of his friends, but knew he should only talk to Hermione and Ginny, since a lot of what had happened had to do with Snape, and their arrangement. But he couldn't talk to them at the moment, because Snape had asked that their session resume. Am I in any emotional condition to do that? wondered Harry. He approached Snape's office, then stopped for a minute to try to summon a loving state of mind. It was very difficult, considering what had just happened, both with McGonagall and Snape. He tried, and did his best.

He entered Snape's office, and sat down. Without a word, Snape pointed his wand at Harry, and images started to flash in his mind. He saw himself and Ginny, in his Hogwarts quarters, naked, on his bed...

Harry looked into Snape's eyes, and found what he saw very disturbing. Not only was Snape still very angry, but there was a gleam in his eyes, as though he was enjoying what he was doing, for all the wrong reasons. Making an impulsive decision, Harry grabbed his wand and shoved Snape out of his mind.

Snape looked at Harry in disbelief. “You're not going to do that,” said Harry. He'd had almost no chance to think about it, and he knew it could have serious consequences, but he strongly felt that it was the right thing to do.

Snape glared at Harry, anger mounting again. “I can look at anything I want! This was explained to you—”

“Not this, not now,” Harry interrupted him, adding to Snape's anger. “The only reason you're looking at this right now is because you want to embarrass me. You're angry with me, so you want me to feel embarrassed at that kind of thing being viewed, and enjoy the feeling. That's not what this is about, and I'm not going to let you do it.”

“You must,” insisted Snape. “You agreed to this, you agreed to allow anything to be viewed. There were no conditions, no stipulations.”

“There’s one that’s implied, and that’s what Muggles call ‘good faith,’” replied Harry. “This is to help you cope with everyday life. That’s why I’m doing it, that’s why you’re doing it. It is not so you can enjoy my embarrassment. I don’t think enjoying my embarrassment is helping you, but even if it was, it wouldn’t be acceptable anyway. For me to do what I do, I have to have a certain amount of affection for you. Difficult as that seemed at first, I have managed it. But your doing something like this jeopardizes that. You can’t do something to me that I know is malicious.”

“You talk about me being malicious,” sneered Snape. “You know how I feel about perverts, and you go out of your way to protect them!”

Voice slightly raised, Harry cut in before Snape could continue. “Nothing I did was to deliberately hurt you, and you know that. You would never have even known about this if it wasn’t for our arrangement, this had nothing to do with you. I have to do what I would normally do even if you couldn’t see my memories. Not only in private with Ginny, but in situations like this, or even when talking about you to Ginny or Hermione. You know that, too. This is just because you’re angry right now. I understand that, but what you’re doing is destructive, and I won’t allow it.” Harry stood and took a step to the door, then paused before leaving. “The next time you call, I’ll assume it’s because you’re ready to do this properly, the way it’s supposed to be done.” He could see nothing on Snape’s face but anger, but figured that it wasn’t surprising. He opened the door and left.

Mentally exhausted, he headed for his own office. He held up his hand, and asked Ginny to find Hermione and for them both to meet him there. She said she would, and he was only waiting a few minutes in his office before they arrived. He conjured a third chair, and as they sat, he said, “Boy, I can’t wait for this day to be over.”

“I was hoping it wasn’t quite over yet,” said Ginny. Harry knew she was referring to their weekly visit to his quarters, which they usually did on Sunday evening.

“I hate to say it, but I’m not sure tonight’s a good night for that,” he said sadly. Ginny looked at him quizzically, and he told them about what had happened; both meetings with Snape, and the one with McGonagall in between. They shook their heads at least twice each throughout the story, and Ginny was angry by the time he finished.

“I can see why you’re not keen on going to the quarters tonight, I wouldn’t be either,” she said, adding, “Bastard. It’s bad enough that that kind of thing has the possibility of being viewed at all, but the idea that he’ll do it maliciously is really something else. Like you said to him, that wasn’t part of the deal. He really did abuse it. What is his problem with gays, anyway? I’ve never seen anyone get like that.”

“Maybe he ‘experimented’ when he was younger, and hates himself now for having done it,” said Hermione, half-seriously.

Harry chuckled humorlessly. “He views this memory and hears you say that, he’ll go ballistic.”

“I don’t care,” said Hermione defensively. “Okay, granted, I’m not the one that has to be around when that happens, but you know that we have to be able to say anything we would normally, as if he weren’t listening. So, you’re just going to wait for him to signal you again? Do you really think he’ll behave appropriately next time?”

Harry shrugged. “He’d better, or I’m stopping it again. I really don’t have any choice; I’m angry with him too, for doing that. I’m trying to be as understanding as I can about it, because I know his situation and how hard it is for him. It’s probably pretty hard for him to deal with it if he gets really angry. But I’m exactly the person he’s not supposed to take it out on. I have to think that once he has some time to work this through, he’ll realize it, and do what he’s supposed to do

next time. I hope so, anyway. Of course, I plan on asking Albus and the other Snape for advice tonight. I hope they tell me something useful.”

“I have a feeling they will,” said Hermione. “I must say, I knew Snape wouldn’t be happy about the Blaise thing, but I never thought he’d react quite like that. He’s really irrational, not only for the thing with you just now, but even trying to use the information he got from you when it wasn’t that important. He should know better, he would if he weren’t so emotional about it.”

“And I managed to tick McGonagall off, too,” said Harry, annoyed at himself. “I’d like to know how I did that.” Taking in Hermione’s incredulous expression, he sarcastically added, “Okay, and if you could tell me without making me feel like a total moron, that’d be even better.” To her wounded look, he said, “Come on, you were looking at me like you couldn’t believe I was so stupid. I’ve had a long day, and not really fun recently.”

Hermione sighed, apparently trying extra hard to be tolerant. “Sorry, it just seems so obvious. You compared her to Albus, twice in the same conversation. That has to be a sensitive spot for her. You criticized her actions by saying that Albus wouldn’t have done it that way. Considering how you feel about him, that’s a lot like saying to her that she’s doing poorly, because she made decisions he wouldn’t have. It’s hard for her, taking the position of someone who was legendary and as well-loved as he was. She’s bound to compare herself to him, and feel she comes up short. And there you are, vocally confirming what she probably fears. And this is coming from the person who she feels is going to be the next Dumbledore, so to speak, stronger than he was and even more well-loved than he was. She probably feels sometimes like she’s a temporary and insignificant figure, a placeholder between two great headmasters, one past, one future. But she has to do what she feels is best, even if it’s different from what Albus would have done. For her to react like that, what you said must’ve really hurt her.”



Harry looked down, upset that he hadn't seen it. "Today seems to be my day for that. Both of you, then her. I wonder what Professor Trelawney would say about my astrological chart for today."

Hermione smiled a little. "Probably, that you're going to die."

Ginny looked at Hermione askance, but Harry burst out in laughter. "Yes, she probably would," he agreed, his laughter dying down. "What?" he asked Ginny, who was wearing a distinctly unhappy look.

Ginny didn't answer for a few seconds, then Hermione did. "I think—"

"Let him figure it out," snapped Ginny. "He needs the practice."

"Why?" asked Hermione defensively. "I'm the one you're upset with, not him."

"Ginny, I'm really not in the mood to be trying to figure things out," said Harry.

Ginny spoke immediately, to Hermione, giving no sign that she'd heard Harry. "You could always tell him through the damn phoenixes, anyway."

Hermione gaped at Ginny. "What?! What does that have to do with anything?"

Harry put his head in his hands, feeling as though he couldn't deal with anything more. He was about to look up when there was a knock on the door. Without asking Ginny or Hermione if they minded, he waved his wand and the door opened, and Pansy walked in. Her expression was wary as she took in everyone's expressions. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but... there's kind of a situation that you need to know about."

"I don't suppose it'd be a good situation, would it?" asked Harry wearily. "I think I've had enough of the other kind."

"No," said Pansy seriously, "it's a bad situation. I'm not sure just how bad, you'll know better than me. Helen just came to me to tell me this. One of the second years overheard you talking to Snape... well, arguing, apparently. They told

the others what they heard, and now all ten of them know lots of stuff they shouldn't. Some of it is stuff even I didn't know."

Harry cringed. "Oh, this day just keeps getting better," he muttered. "All right, what do they know?"

"They know all about the Blaise thing, pretty much everything I told you, and they knew that Snape wanted to expel him and the other one and you argued with him. They know that Snape's a spy for the Order against Voldemort, and that he killed Skeeter." Harry exchanged alarmed looks with Ginny and Hermione. "But that's stuff I already knew," continued Pansy grimly. "Helen also said that whoever it was overheard that... Snape is viewing your memories, and something about it being important for him to be 'viable' as a spy against Voldemort. Which raises more questions than it answers, but never mind that. I assume this has to do with what the three of you know about Snape that you can't talk about. I had a feeling this was bad."

Harry almost laughed out loud at the understatement. "Oh, this is worse than bad," he said incredulously. "This is... the scope of how bad it is, is immense. Kingsley doesn't know this, or Bright, or Hugo... only we three, McGonagall, and Snape. That's it. Now ten second years know? Okay, not all of it, but enough for it to be dangerous. Enough that if Voldemort found out, we'd lose Snape. I don't believe this..."

Clearly trying to be reassuring, Pansy said, "If we found out one thing last year, it's that they can keep a secret. They kept mine for a long time."

Harry couldn't argue with that, but found it hard to be reassured. He felt as though if this had been less bad, he would have lost his temper, but that this was so bad that it was almost ludicrous, comical. At the same time, he understood that it was very serious. "How did they overhear, anyway? As soon as Snape started yelling at me, I soundproofed the room."

"I don't know. Helen didn't give all the details, she just told me the main stuff. She was really nervous, she feels like they're in over their heads. She came to

me to ask what I thought they should do. I told her I'd tell you, that you'd know what to do."

Harry did laugh out loud now, as the other three glanced at each other, concerned. "I appreciate your faith in me, Pansy, but I don't have a clue what I'm going to do. Well, not quite. I am going to talk to them, I know that much. What I'm going to say, or do beyond that, I don't know. But I suppose I'll think of something." Turning to Ginny and Hermione, he asked, "Would you mind if I talked to them now? I'd like to get this over with, maybe... I don't know, relax for some of the evening. Doesn't seem likely, but you never know."

They nodded somberly, and dogs started coming out of Harry's wand one by one, until the tenth had run off. "I'll go out there, put out the carpet. Would you mind staying here? I'll probably need to talk to you when I'm finished." They nodded again. Turning to Pansy, he said, "Maybe you should be with me when I do this." Smiling a little, he added, "You are their mother, after all."

"Sure," she said, with a sad smile, obviously seeing how stressed he felt. He walked out into the classroom; Pansy followed and closed the door behind her.

Harry moved the chairs aside and conjured the carpet. He was about to sit when, on a sudden impulse, he reached out to hug Pansy instead. She hugged him back tightly. "It's been a really bad day," he said, as he felt himself seem to gain emotional strength from the hug. He felt her nod into his shoulder.

After about a half a minute, he let go. "Thanks," he said, looking at her appreciatively. "That really helped."

"Well, you're the one who said in his class that hugging is a good thing to be doing," she reminded him. They both sat down, Pansy slightly behind Harry to emphasize that he was the one speaking to the second years. Less than a minute later, they filed into the room and sat on the carpet in front of Harry. Looking at them, Harry saw something unusual for them: they looked frightened. He wondered why they should feel that way for knowing things they shouldn't know.

“Why do you all look like that?” he asked, then wondered if he should have been more diplomatic about it.

“It was the dogs,” said David.

Harry looked at them blankly; Helen explained. “They usually jump up, they’re happy to see us. This time, they just sat there, waiting. We think it means you’re mad at us.”

Harry nodded, more to himself than to them. It makes sense, he thought. “No, I’m not mad,” he said wearily. “It’s just been a bad day, and this... well, this is really bad. I called you because I wanted to find out how it happened, exactly what you know if there was anything you didn’t mention to Pansy. First of all, it was a good idea to go to her. Now, how did you hear what I said to Snape?”

“One of us went to talk to you,” said Helen. “The map told us you were in Snape’s office, so that person went there to wait for you to finish. Then that person heard Snape yelling at you, and was concerned for you... and that person happened to be the one carrying the Extendable Ears. That person put them under the door to listen.”

Harry looked at Pansy in astonishment, then back at the second years. “Why? Why would you do that?”

“They were scared, Professor!” said an obviously distressed Helen. “We know how Snape can be, but we know he’s not supposed to yell at other teachers. The person thought it might be really bad, like I said, they were scared for you. They... just wanted to know what was happening.”

Harry sighed; he was still angry, but he could understand why they would do that; he could see himself doing it, since he had done something like it as recently as fifth year. “You keep saying ‘that person.’ I assume that means you don’t want to tell me who it was.”

She nodded. “We all think we would have done the same thing, so we should all take responsibility for it.” Her voice trembling a little, she added, “If you’re going to be mad, you have to be mad at all of us.”

He looked at them one by one. All were nervous and unhappy, but Hedrick was much more so than the rest, and he had an obviously guilty look. Harry instantly understood that Hedrick was the one who had done it, and wondered fleetingly if this was what Dentus had meant when he'd said that Harry's emotions showed very clearly on his face. Deciding he wanted to confirm it, he reached for his wand inside his robe sleeve, but didn't take it out. Holding it, he cast Legilimens on Hedrick, and immediately got a memory of Hedrick standing outside Snape's office door, listening on the Extendable Ears. Harry knew that Hedrick would notice the flash of memory, but would just assume it was a random memory caused by his guilt.

Harry decided not to tell them that he knew who it was. "I really think it'll be better if the person who did it just tells me—"

"We have to stick together, Professor!" said Helen, with emotion. "You taught us that!"

With equal emotion, Harry replied, "Stick together against enemies, against adversaries! Not me! Or is that how you see me right now?"

On the verge of tears, Helen pleaded, "Professor, don't say that! You know how we feel about you. We just knew you'd be mad at the one who did it, and we'd rather spread it out over all of us, because I really do think we would have all done the same thing."

Harry tried to calm himself, but still felt very emotional. "If I'm upset at you, it's more for not trusting me enough to tell me who it is than for the actual listening. If whoever did it trusts me, they'll tell me, and trust that I'll be reasonable about it."

Most of the Slytherins were looking down, upset but determined to stick to what they'd decided. Hedrick appeared to be in even greater distress, clearly feeling guilty over the difficulty his actions had caused.

Pansy spoke. "Listen, I think you should tell him. I can see it really bothers him that you won't, and here's why. You would tell each other this, you would admit

you did something to each other. If you won't admit it to him, it means you don't trust him like you do each other, it gives a stronger idea that he's 'outside' your group. I kind of feel the same way. I'd like to think it was the twelve of us, not ten plus two on the outside—"

"I did it," interrupted Hedrick.

"Hedrick!" exclaimed Helen sharply. "We agreed—"

"But we didn't think of it this way, and they're right," said Hedrick firmly. "Pansy and Professor Potter aren't outsiders, we should be able to tell them anything we tell each other. I don't want them to feel that way."

"Thank you, Hedrick," said Harry sincerely. "I appreciate it." To the others, he said, "Look, I know your instinct is to protect each other, to stick together, and that's great. But you should do that against people who are trying to hurt you, not people who..." He paused to take a breath. "Not people who love you. I love you, all of you. I just wanted to make sure you knew that."

Most of them were trying not to cry, some unsuccessfully. "We love you too, Professor," said Helen, her eyes brimming with tears, as others nodded.

"I know, and it makes me really happy," he told them. He felt as though he wanted to wade into the group and hug all of them, but there were still serious things to talk about. "Okay, now we need to think about what to do, how bad this is. First of all, I need to mention your knowing that Professor Snape is a spy against Voldemort. It's very, very important that no one know about this. If this gets out, Professor Snape would be killed, and we would lose him as a spy. His being a spy is extremely valuable. I can't say this strongly enough. We could lose the fight against Voldemort if anything happens to him. Do you understand?"

All ten nodded. "Professor," said Augustina, "When Hedrick told us, we understood that it was really serious, way more than we're supposed to know. After Pansy went to tell you, we talked some more. We agreed that you should do Memory Charms on all of us. It's better if we don't know this."

"I can't," he replied. "It's illegal, you're not seventeen."

“We don’t care,” said Hedrick.

“I do, though,” said Harry. “Besides, I think you can keep these secrets, you’ve kept other important ones before. And doing that would only solve part of the problem; the other problem is what happens if Professor Snape finds out that you know this, that you were listening.”

Helen nodded. “We were going to mention that, we’re worried about that too. You said that he killed that reporter for knowing too much. We know too much. He doesn’t know we know, but he will by viewing your memories, the same way he found out about Blaise.”

“He wouldn’t kill you,” said Harry with slightly more confidence than he felt. “Ten of you would be too many, it would be noticed. He couldn’t take the risk.”

“I was hoping you would say ‘he wouldn’t do it because it would be wrong,’” said Sylvia uneasily. “Or because we’re students in his House, or something like that.”

Harry shook his head. “He doesn’t operate by what’s right and wrong; his ultimate motivation for everything is defeating Voldemort. He wants that really badly, and would do anything to accomplish it, including get killed himself. He’s risked his life, endured enormous difficulties, to do that. Doing anything to all ten of you would expose him.”

“I’m not so sure, Harry,” said a concerned Pansy. “They’re in his House, after all. What if he did something that was made to look like an accident? I mean, I don’t think he would either, but I’m not so sure that I’d risk their lives on it.”

“No, I agree. I mean, I really don’t think it would happen, but I won’t take the chance either. But if he would kill them for knowing, then Memory Charms wouldn’t stop him; he didn’t think a Memory Charm on Skeeter would have been enough.” Harry saw a few Slytherins exchange frightened looks. “No, we have to see to it that he doesn’t find out about this, and there’s only one way to do that. I’m

going to have Hermione do a Memory Charm on me. I won't remember anything involving the second years about this situation."

"But Snape will know it's there, like Hermione found the other one that Snape gave you," pointed out Pansy. "Won't he wonder what's behind it? And he'll know it happened recently, because it wasn't there before."

"He can wonder all he wants, but he won't find out," said Harry firmly. "And I wouldn't be able to tell him anything anyway." He knew Snape would be angry at the breach of their understanding regarding Harry's memories, but he didn't want to get into that with Pansy and the second years.

"Are you sure, Professor?" asked Augustina, clearly worried.

"Yes, it's fine," he assured her. "There's nothing dangerous about getting a Memory Charm, you were all ready to do it. It just makes sense for it to be me instead. Hermione will remove it when it's no longer necessary, and I'll remember again."

Hedrick still looked stricken. "I'm really sorry, Professor—"

"It's okay, Hedrick," said Harry. He moved forward on the carpet and reached out to Hedrick, who moved closer to Harry. Harry wrapped him in a hug. "It's all right. I forgive you."

"Thank you," said Hedrick, his head on Harry's right shoulder, sniffing and clearly trying very hard not to cry.

Harry patted Hedrick's back. "It's the kind of thing I would have done."

"Helen said that," said Hedrick. Over Hedrick's shoulder, Harry glanced up at Helen with a playful frown and a smile. She smiled back through her own tears.

Harry let go of Hedrick, who went back to his seat on the carpet. "I don't suppose I need to give you a lecture on not saying anything to anybody, or anywhere but your dormitory. Not only the super-secret stuff, but the stuff about Blaise too. The whole reason I was arguing with Snape was that I don't want him expelled, I don't want everyone knowing. He made a mistake, but like Thomas said,



he deserves another chance. I think you all could imagine what it would be like to be in a dormitory with Malfoy and the others like that.”

“I get scared just thinking about it,” agreed David. “But what he did... you’re right, it really is disgusting.”

“Well, I don’t exactly agree with what Professor Snape thinks,” clarified Harry. “As you heard, as Hedrick heard, he was really angry, really emotional. I don’t like the idea, but I don’t care so much. I always just thought it was wrong, but Hermione was trying to tell me that it’s not wrong, just different. If Hermione says something, I try to listen carefully.”

“I’m sure she would say, not often enough,” remarked Pansy.

“Or well enough, yes,” agreed Harry. “Does anybody have any questions about anything? Remember, I may not be able to answer most of them.”

“What you do, with Professor Snape, it’s not dangerous, is it?” asked David.

“No, it’s not dangerous,” Harry assured him. “And by the way, I know you’re wondering about it, especially why; what’s the point of him viewing my memories, how does it help him stay ‘viable.’ All I can say is that it’s something that Professor Dumbledore used to do for him before he died, and asked me to continue. The reason it has to be done is very unusual; you’d never guess it in a million years, so don’t even bother trying. I would never have guessed it until I found out.”

“Does it have something to do with why he’s always mean and never happy?” asked Helen.

Harry raised his eyebrows, surprised that anyone had stumbled onto that. Then again, he thought, it is Snape’s most obvious personality trait. “Hmmm... maybe answering questions isn’t such a good idea.” He saw Helen smile, knowing that she had come close to something. “I know you’re all concerned about me, and I appreciate it, but I’ll be all right, really.

“There’s a few things you have to keep in mind, before I let you go. One is, and now you would know this anyway, but anything that I know is something Snape could know. Obviously don’t mention any of this around me, but also don’t

mention to me anything that you don't want Snape knowing. He doesn't know everything that happens to me, mainly just the important things. If you're not sure, or are worried, talk to Pansy. Don't make any reference to the Memory Charm, that you know about it. If he sees that, he'll know you're connected to it, and we don't want that.

“Also, be sure to act around Snape like you normally would. If you act all nervous around him, he could figure out that something was going on, maybe even connect it to my Memory Charm. Just pretend that everything's as usual in Potions, or if you see him in the Slytherin common room.

“Okay, I'm going to go have Hermione do the Memory Charm now. When it's done, I won't remember any of today's events that involved you; it'll be as though I never saw you today. Like I said, when it's not necessary anymore, she'll lift it. I hope that happens soon, because I want to remember this. You're all very important to me.”

He stood, and they did as well. As he was going to say goodbye, Helen rushed forward and hugged him. Soon he was getting hugs from all of them, even the boys, as was Pansy. When he had hugged all of them, he felt his emotions rising again. “Okay, now I definitely want to remember this. That was very nice, thank you. And I promise the next time my dog finds you, it'll be happy again.” They thanked him and filed out.

Pansy put an arm around his shoulders. “You handled that very well, for someone who had such a bad day.”

“There's something about being in a room with ten people who love you that helps your mood.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Eleven people,” she corrected him.

“Sorry, I didn't mean—”

“Don't worry about it,” she said, squeezing his shoulders and letting him go. “I know what you meant, I didn't take any offense.”

“It’s just that I’ve managed to offend three people today without meaning to,” he explained. “I didn’t want to make it one more.”

They walked back to his office, and opened the door. “So, how did it go with them?” asked Hermione.

“Pretty well, I think they understand just how serious it is. There’s still the problem of Snape knowing they know, of course. I’ve decided to deal with that by having you cover up anything to do with them with a Memory Charm.”

Hermione nodded reluctantly. “That was kind of the only answer, but Snape’s not going to like it at all. He’ll expect everything to be available.”

“That was before he showed that he can’t be counted on to maintain any kind of discretion. Of course, I won’t be able to tell him... well, I guess I can. You’ll just have to tell me after you do the Charm why you did it, so I’ll know what to tell him. I’ll still remember that he abused his discretion with this Blaise thing, so at least I’ll understand what I’m telling him, if not exactly why. I need you to cover up everything from when Pansy interrupted to just before you do the Charm.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to wait a day, ask Albus what he thinks?” she asked. “There might be a reason why this isn’t a good idea.”

Harry shook his head. “I think Albus would tell me to do what I was comfortable with, but I’m not going to ask him anyway. I just don’t trust Snape right now, and while I’m 99.9% sure that he wouldn’t harm them, I’m not willing to take the chance with that other point one percent. Also, he’d make their lives miserable if he knew, especially Hedrick. I know what that’s like, I don’t want them put through that. No, I’m doing this. Albus won’t be able to talk to me about it, but that’s livable. I’m sure he’ll respect the Memory Charm and not say anything about it.”

“Okay, if you’re sure,” said Hermione. “Is there anything in particular you want me to tell you afterwards?”

He couldn’t think of anything specific. “Just what you’d probably tell me anyway, keeping in mind that Snape will know whatever you tell me afterwards.”

“Obviously,” she agreed. “Shall I?”

“Go ahead.”

Standing near the stream, Harry reached down and put his hand into the water. It was cool, clear, and felt very real for something he knew wasn't physical. He turned to see Dumbledore smiling at him. “As I have said before, while it is not... permanent as you understand it, it is no less real than your normal physical environment. It is no surprise that it should feel real.”

“I guess some things are hard to get used to,” he said as he sat down, noticing that Snape was suddenly there.

“I knew I would be needed, after today's events,” explained Snape. “Today was quite a challenge in terms of your attempting to help him.”

“I wish I hadn't had to have Hermione do the Memory Charm... wait a minute, I can remember it! What happened with the second years! How can I remember? I couldn't after she did it.”

“This is different from your waking conscious state,” Dumbledore explained. “You are asleep; Memory Charms only function when you are awake. People sometimes dream of events covered by Memory Charms; the mind categorizes them and does not allow them to be remembered upon waking. When you wake up, you will not remember the events you had covered, nor any part of this conversation relating to them.”

“Well, that's convenient,” said Harry, surprised. “So, let me ask you first... did he ever try to do anything like that to you that he did to me, viewing my sexual memories to deliberately embarrass me?”

“Not as such, because he knew I could not be embarrassed,” replied Dumbledore without false modesty. “But I take your meaning, and there were two occasions on which I believe he would have if he could have. One was immediately after the events at the end of your third year, in which Sirius was set free. We had a session later that night, but he was in no emotional condition to have one. I knew

that beforehand, but I preferred to let him find out for himself. If he is too angry, the sessions do not work as they should; he gets no emotional sustenance from them. Your decision to stop the session, while impulsive, was correct for more than one reason: he was getting nothing out of it except the sort of enjoyment he should not be experiencing, and as you pointed out, he was deliberately acting maliciously toward you, which is counterproductive.”

“I wasn’t happy about stopping,” said Harry. “I just knew it was the right thing to do. How long will it be until he’s back to normal?”

“It should be a few days,” said Snape. “Maybe sooner. Certainly not long enough to jeopardize his overall mental state.

“You wish to know why he reacted so badly to what happened, which you viewed as relatively unimportant,” continued Snape, responding, as Snape and Dumbledore often did, to the next question in Harry’s mind. “He would not wish me to tell you, and will be angry that I have. But considering that you have had no secrets from him, and that this caused him to behave in a way that caused you distress and violated your understanding regarding how information was to be used or not used, you deserve to know.

“Many years ago, when I was a child—again, of course, when I say ‘I’ in this situation I refer to the fact that I was a part of him at that time—I was sexually abused by an associate of my father’s. I was sufficiently confused and frightened at the time that I did not resist or fight, something about which I later came to be bitterly unhappy. I engaged in self-loathing for a period, but after I discovered the existence of homosexuals, I directed my anger in that direction, blaming them as a group for what had happened to me. It was also a very formative experience in that the bitterness it produced helped steer me to my interest in the Dark Arts: partly as a means to defend myself against any such future attempts, and partly because it appealed to my anger, the dark part of me which was becoming stronger and stronger.”

Good Lord, thought Harry, that sure explains a lot about Snape. The Cleansing explained how he became the way he currently was, but this explained how he ever got to a point where he would agree to the Cleansing. Harry felt great sympathy for Snape, and wondered how he would have been affected if he had endured what Snape had.

“It is a good question, and one which is useful to ask if you wish to empathize with him,” said Snape. “No one can know, of course, not even you, but it is certainly a great trauma. Many who suffer it experience repercussions lasting a lifetime.”

Harry nodded. “I can imagine. Well, not really, but you know what I mean. At least now I understand why he reacts so violently to anything to do with homosexuality, even making jokes about it.”

“Yes, but there is something you should understand, which you currently do not because you lack the life experience to do so,” said Dumbledore. “You see, Severus is placing blame where it does not belong. He refers to homosexuality as ‘perversion,’ and if referring to such abuse as he suffered, would use the same word. He does not make a distinction between the two, but there is an enormous difference. Children are deeply harmed by sexual abuse. Homosexuality, if practiced between consenting adults, harms no one. The only way in which they are similar is that they both involve sexual preferences other than is normal. Some men are sexually attracted to other men; a few are attracted to children. The latter are particularly cursed by their inclinations, one could say, since they cannot avoid causing harm in satisfying their desires. Two men can make love and harm no one, but a man attracted to children must repress his sexual desires for all his life if he wishes to cause no harm.

“Like many others, Severus equates the two because they both involve sexual activity among two males, but this analogy is deeply flawed. Men such as the one who abused him are attracted to boys because they are children, not because they are male. Homosexuals have suffered from this prejudice for most of recorded

history; only now, in the Western Muggle world, are large segments of the population becoming tolerant and accustomed to homosexuality. As Hermione explained, the wizarding world, being insular as it is, is quite behind this trend. One cannot be openly homosexual in the wizarding world and be accepted, whereas it is quite possible in much of the Muggle world. While not directly relevant to the situation with Severus, this is useful information for you to be aware of.”

Harry was reminded of Hermione having given him similar informational lectures. “I assume that you were very accepting of this when you were physical.”

“Of course. Throughout my life, a number of homosexuals sought me out for advice; not because I had any special understanding of their situation, but because they knew I would be understanding and as helpful as possible. More than once I attempted to explain to Severus what I have just explained to you, but unfortunately, he was simply irrational on the subject, and could not be persuaded. For the most part, we simply avoided the subject.

“You are correct when you say that Severus violated the understanding you had regarding how information obtained from you was to be used, but you may wish to consider that he did not do so willfully, in a sense. This subject is so sensitive for him that one could almost say he was not in control of his actions. Even so, it is understandable that you found it necessary to have the Memory Charm done. You could not know when else he might breach your understanding. It was thoughtful of Hermione to suggest that you consult with me first, but you were correct; you did not need my assistance. Your ‘gut’ told you to do what you did, and you will do well to listen to it.”

Harry addressed Snape. “Would he have actually killed them?”

“I cannot know that any more than you can,” said Snape. “I can only reach the same conclusion as you: it is highly unlikely, but not impossible.”

“How do you think he’ll react when he finds the Memory Charm? Or, better yet, maybe I should ask, does he understand that he shouldn’t have done what he did, what he tried to do, with Blaise?”

“Yes, they are very related questions,” agreed Snape. “He does realize it, and this realization will become stronger as time passes. I believe he will resent the Memory Charm, but accept it as a consequence of what he did. As further evidence that your decision to have the Memory Charm done was reasonable, I will tell you that he spent some of last night considering ways in which he might have Blaise expelled which would not directly violate Minerva’s instructions, but could not think of any. He plans, the next time he sees Blaise, to do Legilimens on him in order to discover the identity of the other person involved, and look for pretexts to expel them if possible. Yes, that does violate Minerva’s instructions, but he can easily justify it to himself.”

Frustrated, Harry shook his head. “I can’t believe it... well, I can, but... I want to ask you if you think I should tell Professor McGonagall, but I know that’s the kind of thing you won’t give an opinion about. I’ll think about it after I wake up. About Blaise, the only thing I can do is give him a Memory Charm, if he’ll agree to it.”

“He may well not agree,” suggested Dumbledore. “A Memory Charm is not a small thing, and he may not have such a great interest in protecting the identity of the other person involved. It also may not be in his best interest to be unable to access the memory; such experiences are an important part of how we learn.”

“Damn,” muttered Harry, sure that Dumbledore was right. “Doesn’t Snape know that this jeopardizes what we do even more?”

“He is irrational on the subject,” Snape reminded him. “Also, he thinks that you will not find out what he plans, at least not until he has found a way to expel them. And yes, this is not information I would normally provide. But I will tell you things about him, because I am he, in a sense, and therefore somewhat entitled. I also believe that your being aware of this will help in the long term.”

“Okay, thanks,” said Harry. “I’ll think more about this in the morning, also.” He talked with Dumbledore and Snape for a little longer, then resumed his sleep.



\* \* \* \* \*

“Harry!” John greeted him as he and Hermione walked into the staff room with their phoenixes after lunch the next day. “So, how much are you being paid to protect the Minister?”

Harry chuckled. “He’ll be in my debt, which is better anyway,” he joked. He knew that the staff would all have read the story in that morning’s Prophet.

“May I ask, Harry,” asked Dentus, “how the decision was reached to make that information public?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t participate in that kind of decision, of course. I guess Professor McGonagall would know.” He glanced at her, asking the same question without words.

“Since Voldemort knew, there was no advantage in keeping it secret,” she said. “We find it generally preferable not to keep secret that which is not necessary to keep secret. I assume you are thinking of the political repercussions of it being publicly known that Harry saved the Minister’s life.”

Dentus nodded. “Harry’s joke aside, Bright will be in Harry’s debt, in a public way. I’m sure Bright understood this might happen when he asked for Harry’s protection, but it was understandably a second priority to staying alive.”

“You mean, he’d just as soon not be in Harry’s debt in quite this way,” clarified John.

“Politicians would rather not be in anyone’s debt, at least not in debts such as this one, which can’t be easily repaid with a political favor. But I’m sure he considered the fact that it’s better to be indebted to Harry in this way than most anyone else.”

“Why is that?” wondered a puzzled Harry.

Dentus glanced at Hermione, giving her a silent quiz. Smiling briefly in response, she said to Harry, “You’re less likely than most other people to call in the debt. He’d know that you’d be uncomfortable going to him one day and saying, ‘I

saved your life, so please do this for me.' As he said last month, that's not the way you work."

"But if I ever needed something from him and asked him, even if I didn't mention this, he'd think about this as a factor, right?"

Dentus nodded, mildly impressed. "Yes, he would. He would know you didn't intend to imply that he should, but he would anyway. If an Auror had saved him, he wouldn't really have a debt; that's their job. But you, you didn't have to do this."

"But he knows I did it because it was the right thing to do."

"Yes, and a politician's version of the right thing to do is to make what you've done for him a consideration in this kind of situation," Dentus pointed out.

"There is one thing he has done already," said McGonagall. Turning to Harry, she explained, "He contacted me this morning and asked me to relay an invitation: he would like you and Ginny to join he and his wife for dinner."

Harry glanced at Hermione, who was wearing an amused smile. "Yes, I thought you'd like that," he said.

To the other teachers, she explained, "Harry would rather spend the evening with Arthur and Molly, if he had the choice."

"We may not know him as well as you, but we do know him well enough to know that," said Sprout humorously. "You will go, though, won't you, Harry?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't feel right saying no. And it's not as though I don't like him, he's interesting to talk to. I just don't have much experience being invited to dinner."

"I daresay that's only because you haven't made yourself available," said Sprout. "If you did, you wouldn't have to pay for food for a year."

Hermione chuckled. "I think I'd rather buy my own food," said Harry. "Speaking of which, did he say where it would be?"

“Yes, he said it could be at his home, or the Golden Dragon,” said McGonagall. “Whichever one you’d prefer. I hope I was not too presumptuous, but I did inform him of your likely choice.”

There were chuckles all around. “I would say that he was giving Harry a test, but I don’t think he’d bother. No doubt he was just being polite,” said Dentus.

Harry tried not to be annoyed, knowing that they were amused both by knowing which he’d choose before he had, and that he wouldn’t understand Dentus’s reference. Sighing, he asked, “What test?”

“Most people, especially politicians, given this choice would choose the Golden Dragon, because being seen having dinner publicly with the Minister of Magic means that you have his support and endorsement, it’s a kind of political currency,” explained Dentus. “He would know that you wouldn’t seek it because of that, though. Ironically, he would benefit by being seen with you in a way he wouldn’t with anyone else; it would be like getting your endorsement. But he knows that you’ll choose his home because you don’t care to be a spectacle in public, talked about in whispers, and so forth. As I said, he was just being polite in giving you the choice.”

Harry grunted. “I should choose the restaurant, just so you’d all be wrong. But, unfortunately, I don’t like being a spectacle in public, talked about in whispers, and so forth. Oh, well.”

“It’s good of you to have a sense of humor about it,” said Sprout encouragingly. “I’m sure it won’t be so bad.”

“No, I don’t mean I think it will be,” said Harry. “I’m just not that comfortable in that situation with people I don’t know that well. But I know this is another thing I have to get used to.”

“Oh, Harry,” said Hermione, “How did your first years do?”

“Not bad, better than I expected,” he replied. Seeing that the other teachers didn’t know what they were talking about, he explained, “This week, I’m doing the ‘Blue’ test for all my classes, for the first time since the first class. It’s only been two

months, so I don't expect much change. But most of the first years' numbers went up; I don't know if that would be normal, because we don't usually measure them that young. I've got the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw sixth years this afternoon at three; that should be a better indicator."

"Do you think anybody will have it?" asked Flitwick.

Harry shook his head firmly. "No, it's way too soon. I'd be amazed if anyone had it."

"Just out of curiosity, if you had to guess who'd be the first person to get it, who would it be?" wondered John.

Harry thought for a minute. "I guess I'd say Luna."

A few teachers were surprised, but John wasn't. "I can see that. She's comfortable in her own skin, and that probably counts for a lot with what you do."

"Do you think girls are going to get this faster than boys?" asked Sprout.

"I think so. In classes, the girls are generally more comfortable with it. Not that some of the boys aren't doing well, but they seem to have to make a bigger effort."

"Who do you think will be the first boy to get it?" asked Hermione.

After more thought, he answered, "Justin and Colin are the first two that come to mind." None of the teachers seemed surprised at his guesses. He found that despite his attempt to maintain low expectations, he definitely had hopes that at least one student would manage it.

Near the end of the hour, McGonagall got up to leave, and asked Harry to come with her. They walked to the Transfigurations teacher's office, and sat. Before she spoke, Harry did. "Professor, I wanted to apologize—"

She waved him off. "I actually called you in here to tell you that I regret having lost my temper. I appreciate your apology and understand the reason for it, but this is another of those 'he is only seventeen' situations. Even some adults might not have recognized my sensitivity to what you said."

“Hermione explained it to me, of course,” he admitted ruefully. “I wouldn’t have figured it out. I really didn’t mean to compare you to him. I know that’s what I did anyway, and I feel bad about it. I’m sorry.”

She nodded understandingly. “It would be very hard for you not to. Anyone would think it, it is just a matter of whether they would say it or not. People will compare me to him, Harry. It is unavoidable, and I must get used to it. May I ask what Albus said last night? I assume you talked to him.”

“We talked about a few things; he spent some time saying basically that there’s nothing wrong with two men or two women being in love if they want to. I guess from what you said last night that you don’t agree with him.”

Looking uncertain, McGonagall replied, “We discussed the topic more than once; this is hardly the first time such a thing has happened at Hogwarts. I cannot say I think he is wrong; he has an excellent point. I simply cannot make myself comfortable with the idea.” Eyeing him appraisingly, she added, “I have a feeling you will, though.”

He shrugged lightly. “Hermione agrees with Albus. She compared it to a food that you really hate: you wouldn’t want to eat it yourself, but you wouldn’t stop someone else from doing it if they wanted to. I could see where that made sense; I just have to think more about the concept and less about the details.”

“Yes, that would be helpful,” agreed McGonagall wryly. Turning more serious, she said, “Harry, I understand why you did not come to me about the matter regarding Mr. Zabini, but I would like to think that I can be trusted with such information. I would like to know that you would tell me things that you know I would want to know. Is that something you think you can do?”

Uncomfortably, he nodded. Part of him didn’t want to, because the fact was that he didn’t regard her like he did Dumbledore, and knew she would make different decisions than he would. On the other hand, he felt she did deserve his trust. “There is one thing. Last night, Severus told me that Professor Snape plans to disregard your instructions about the Blaise thing. He plans to yank out the memory

from Blaise about who the other boy was, and see if he can find a pretext to have them expelled eventually.”

McGonagall sighed in frustration. “Well, you predicted it. Very well, I will take what action I feel is appropriate. You should do nothing further regarding this. Is there anything else?”

Harry realized that she wasn’t telling him what action she planned to take because Snape would view the memory. He briefly considered telling her about the Memory Charm, but realized that there was nothing he could really tell her. He had a feeling that whatever was under the Memory Charm was something she would want to know, but he couldn’t be sure. Also, if he told her about the Charm, she might go to Hermione and ask to be told what it hid, and he didn’t want to put Hermione in the position of choosing between what he wanted and what McGonagall wanted.

“No, nothing else,” he said.

“Very well, then, I believe it is almost time for Charms,” she said. They left the room and went their separate ways.

After his sixth year Defense Against the Dark Arts class ended at four-fifty, Harry took Fawkes to the Aurors, then went with Kingsley to Bright’s residence. Putting down the plot only took an hour, after which Ginny joined him in Bright’s living room, where they were joined by Bright’s wife, Madeline. Like her husband, she was attractive; she had brown hair, large eyes, and a slightly large nose, which didn’t detract from her appearance. Harry felt she looked younger than what he assumed her age to be.

“I’m very happy to be able to thank both of you properly,” she said in greeting them. Harry didn’t know whether to offer to shake her hand or not, but was soon spared the decision: she approached him and kissed him on the cheek. “That was for saving my husband,” she said, and moving on to Ginny, added, “And this is for saving me.” She kissed Ginny’s cheek as well. “Thank you both so much.”

Slightly embarrassed, Harry just nodded. “We were happy to do it,” said Ginny.

Rudolphus motioned them to chairs, and they all sat. “We were also implored by our house-elf to pass along her thanks. Apparently one of the Hogwarts house-elves has made it his mission to spread your legend among the house-elf community, not that they wouldn’t know about you anyway.” Noting Ginny’s smile, he asked, “Is there some story about that?”

Harry explained his history with Dobby, relating the incidents involving him five years ago and ending with how he tricked Lucius Malfoy into giving Dobby a sock. Grinning, Bright said, “Why, you clever little rascal. I’d love to have seen his face.”

Ginny took up the story. “Naturally, that earned Harry Dobby’s eternal adoration, and he wastes no opportunity to talk about Harry in ways that he doesn’t understand Harry finds extremely embarrassing, since to Dobby, it’s just the obvious truth.”

The Brights laughed. “House-elves aren’t too sensitive to that kind of thing,” remarked Rudolphus. “I offered to let her tell you herself, but she was far too embarrassed, to be in the presence of someone so... you get the idea.”

Ginny reached over and squeezed Harry’s hand for a second, saying, “Yes, sometimes I feel that way too.”

Harry smiled tolerantly as the Brights laughed again. “The last thing you ever are is embarrassed,” he retorted. “I don’t think I’ve seen you embarrassed once since we’ve been together.”

“Maybe once or twice,” she allowed. “But I really don’t need to, you get embarrassed enough for the both of us.”

“It must be very strange, being Harry Potter’s intended,” commented Madeline. “I don’t mean that in a bad way, of course,” she added to Harry.

“It’s wonderful,” said Ginny, with a smile at Harry, “but I know what you mean. Things do happen to me that wouldn’t otherwise, and not only good things.

But when you love someone, you take whatever comes along with them, good or bad.”

“Yes, I know about that,” Madeline responded, with a fleeting look of fear; Harry wondered if she was remembering yesterday’s attack. “I can’t say I was thrilled that Rudolphus decided to go for the Minister’s job, but as he said at the time, someone had to do it. Not that he was the only one who tried, but if you let yourself be intimidated into not doing something you would normally do, you’re not really living your life. It’s easy to understand that in the abstract, just a little more difficult after yesterday.”

No one said anything for a moment, then Rudolphus broke the silence. “Harry, it could be my imagination, but are you a little happier today than usual?”

Harry and Ginny broke out in smiles. “You should have seen him earlier, he was delirious,” said Ginny. “He was almost as happy as I’ve ever seen him.” She gestured for Harry to explain.

“This week, I’m checking all my students to see how they’re coming along with the energy of love. You may have read that the way I know if they have it is if their non-vocalized spells are as effective as their vocalized ones. I didn’t expect that anyone would have it already, after only two months, but one person did it.”

Rudolphus’s eyebrows rose. “Who?”

“Luna Lovegood.”

“Oh, yes, her father runs that magazine, the one that ran the interview you did when you were trying to get the word out about Voldemort,” recalled Rudolphus.

“It happened in the class that I take from him,” continued Ginny. “When Harry saw that ‘100’ show up after she did the spell, he reacted as if Gryffindor had just won the Quidditch Cup. I won’t embarrass him by imitating what he did, but he was... exuberant. Then he walked over and hugged her. It was great.”

Now the Brights smiled. “That’s wonderful,” said Madeline.



“I recall that you were hesitant about teaching it,” added Rudolphus. “I suppose that makes this even sweeter.”

“I was worried that maybe only a few people would get it, and I still don’t know for certain that that won’t be the case. But this is a really good sign, which is why I was, I am, so happy. I always knew Luna had a good chance; she’s very serene, not much bothers her. It’s also really good that this was the first one to happen in a classroom, not just my friends and I together. If she can get it, others can too. I think this’ll help other people’s motivation, give them more hope.”

“It’s funny that it happened to be her,” said Ginny. To the Brights, she explained, “Her personality is kind of... odd, I guess. She wears strange clothes, she believes the stuff her father prints, she says odd things. She’s a very nice person, just strange. I have a feeling this is going to change how people see her.”

“I hope so,” said Harry. “Actually, I think she won’t care about that. The thing I’ve always liked about her is that she doesn’t care what people think about her.”

“Harry can identify with that,” grinned Ginny. “Being so famous as he’s always been, he’s happiest when he can manage that.”

“As opposed to someone like me, whose primary concern at all times is what people think of me,” said Rudolphus in a self-mocking way.

“That’s from professional necessity, not ego,” pointed out Madeline.

He shrugged. “Maybe, but you know that I’ve wondered whether anyone gets into politics without having a pretty healthy ego in the first place. And even if you didn’t start with one, you’re bound to end up with one.” To Harry and Ginny, he said, “You’d be amazed at the number of politicians who forget, at least occasionally, that people are being nice to them because they want something in return, not because they’re such wonderful people.”

“Well, I want to know more about what happened in that class, I think it’s fascinating,” said Madeline, with a glance at her husband that suggested that he had wrongly steered the topic in a different direction. “How did the class react?”

“Everyone was quiet, because they were so surprised,” said Ginny. “But after Harry finished hugging her and she went back to her seat, she got a round of applause. After Harry finished testing everyone else, he asked her to talk about what she had done, what it was like for her. I think she did the best she could, but I’m not sure what she said will help anyone else. It would be like if Harry tried to explain what makes him a really good Seeker.”

“Some things, like natural talent, aren’t easy to put into words,” agreed Rudolphus. “Like Madeline and her art.”

“Oh, you do art?” asked Ginny. “What kind?”

“Mainly two-dimensional paintings, but when I get four I really like, I get ambitious and try to do a Ring of Reduction based on them,” she said. “Often it doesn’t turn out how I’d like and I don’t keep it, but a few have been all right. It’s a real challenge to do something in three dimensions and have it look good.”

“It shouldn’t surprise you to know that I think she’s just being modest,” put in Rudolphus.

“Professor Flitwick said you needed strong magical ability to do that kind of artwork,” noted Harry.

“Oh, you’d be working on that right now, wouldn’t you,” said Madeline. “What is yours going to be?”

“He won’t tell anyone, he says he wants us to be surprised when we see it,” said Ginny, feigning annoyance at Harry’s behavior.

“That’s really just because I’m not sure what it’s going to be,” joked Harry. “Well, okay, I think I know what one is going to be, but I want that to be a surprise. The others, I have a few ideas, but I haven’t decided.”

“With your strength, you could do something really impressive,” said Rudolphus.

“Professor Flitwick mentioned that. In class, in front of everyone.” The others grinned, imagining his reaction, part of which was currently reflected on his face. “It was mainly to tease me, I’m sure. Also, I think it was partly because of

Hermione. She said in the staff room last week that my strength is annoying in Transfigurations, because I can do some of the things without really learning the way I'm supposed to. She said she won't call on me anymore when asking for volunteer demonstrations. Something about it being a bad example for the other students. Also, a few times when she's assigned essays, she's given me this look, like, yes, you have to do it too, even if you might not need to. So Professor Flitwick is letting me know he's holding me to a higher standard."

"How is Hermione liking teaching?" asked Rudolphus.

"She really likes it," answered Ginny. "She gets all excited telling us about it, how one of the first years did this or that. But some things frustrate her, like students who obviously didn't study and do poorly, or who studied a little the day before, just enough to write a not-very-good essay. She knows that not everyone's going to be like her, but she didn't realize it would be quite like it is."

"She's complained about it a few times," added Harry. "The last time she did, I told her that she shouldn't be surprised, that that's the kind of work Ron and I would have done most of the time if we hadn't had her around helping us. For some reason it didn't make her feel better."

"I wouldn't say that to her again, if I were you," advised Ginny, as the Brights chuckled.

"That must be an interesting aspect to your group now," said Madeline. "Two of you teachers, with phoenixes. Does that change how the group feels, or interacts?"

Ginny thought. "And two Legilimens, which may be even more important. But no, I don't think it changes how we feel as a group. They don't act differently because of it; it would affect the group if they did. Their status as teachers doesn't really matter, because they're already sort of the unofficial leaders of the group. Harry is like the heart of the group. We look to him for leadership; he inspires the rest of us to do what we do. Hermione is the brain of the group, the one we can count on to know what to do and how to do it. The things you mentioned that they

have in common affect the relationship between the two of them, not their relationship with the rest of the group. They definitely have the closest relationship of any two of the group that aren't a couple."

She turned to Harry. "By the way, speaking of the phoenixes, after the class I found out that Hermione knew what happened right away. You were so happy that it traveled from Fawkes to Flora to Hermione; she said she got an image of Luna and the gold '100' in the air, and of course she got your feelings. She was with Neville in the common room, and she used the pendants to tell Ron and Pansy. They were happy too, though apparently Ron's exact words were, 'You couldn't have had a look at the map first?'"

Harry giggled briefly, then explained the maps. "So, it means that they were in one of the couples' places at the time."

A door opened, and Madeline looked across the room at it. "It seems that dinner is ready." Everyone got up, and Madeline led them into the dining room.

They took their seats, and they ate slowly as they continued their conversation. Rudolphus made a reference to a security-related matter, inspiring Harry to ask about something he'd wanted to for a while. "Rudolphus, can you tell me what's going on with the Ministry's ability to keep Death Eaters locked up?"

"Or, lack of ability, you mean," corrected Rudolphus unhappily. "I'm not surprised you ask, I can see where that would be a subject of some interest to you. Unfortunately, it's not the kind of thing that has any quick solution. Losing Azkaban was a real blow, obviously. We have to start from scratch, and it's not easy. What we need is a real facility, designed for this purpose, which we don't have now and can't be built quickly. As you know, the problem isn't keeping the people from escaping, but keeping others from breaking them out. There just aren't any places that are both that secure, and suitable for holding prisoners.

"We're in the planning stages now of building a modern wizard prison. Right now we're looking at building designs and plans for magical safeguards; naturally, the magic that's put in place in and around the building is as important for

security as the building itself. Once that's done, then we'll be able to start construction; with any luck, that could begin before the new year. But the unpleasant fact is that at best, this prison wouldn't be ready for another year. There's just no way around it, and nothing to be done in the meantime but do what we've been doing and hope for the best."

"And I'm guessing that it wouldn't be all that hard for Voldemort or Death Eaters to sabotage this while it's being built," said Harry.

"Very true," confirmed Rudolphus, "and that was part of the reason that nothing had been done until now. It's been almost two years since the dementors left Azkaban; you'd think we'd be further along than this. Even after Fudge saw Voldemort and started turning things around, nothing was done, mainly out of bureaucratic inertia. It wasn't until the prison break the day Hogsmeade was attacked that the question was even considered. Fudge was persuaded not to even make a start on the project, and he cited this as the main reason. I don't agree, of course; that it might fail isn't a good reason not to even try. We'll keep trying until we do it."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Harry. "Besides the obvious reason, part of the reason I wondered was that editorial in the Prophet last month. I'd hate to think it would get so bad that people would think that killing prisoners was the way to do things."

"Certainly, that's not something I want to see either," agreed Rudolphus. "As Dentus probably told you, it was written by an undersecretary who wanted to see what kind of response the idea would get. I don't even think the person who wrote it particularly advocates it. We haven't killed people for a long time; we like to think we're beyond that. On an individual basis, the relatives of a particular murder victim would tend to be in favor of it, but that's revenge, not justice." Harry thought of Molly saying she wanted Percy's killers to suffer, and Neville, in his grief and rage, wanting to drive Bellatrix Lestrange insane. He wondered what Molly would think of the execution of Death Eaters, over half a year after her son's death.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry had just taken his usual lunch seat the next day when he saw Pansy walking toward them, smiling broadly. “Congratulations,” she said.

“You, too,” he said, as she took her seat. Seeing Ron and Ginny’s quizzical looks, he explained. “The early class, my early class, was Gryffindor/Slytherin second year. Helen and Sylvia got 100.”

“Wow, that’s great,” said Ron. “You two must be really happy.” To Hermione, he asked, “Did you get this through the phoenixes too?”

She nodded. “They were a couple of minutes apart, I think. I was teaching the other second years, and I told them about it. They were pretty impressed, both with the information, and how I got it. So how did the class do as a whole?”

“I felt a little bad for the Gryffindors, because they were so far behind the Slytherins. None of the Gryffindors were above 80, and none of the Slytherins were below 80. Brian asked the Slytherins how they did so well; Hedrick said they had sessions of their own. Then Helen stood up and hugged him from behind, around his neck, and said that they’d been ‘practicing.’ It got a huge laugh, of course. Then Andrea said maybe the Gryffindors needed to practice, which got another laugh. The Slytherins didn’t mention that you’d been helping them,” he said to Pansy. “I’m sure that that, along with their general closeness, had a lot to do with it.”

Pansy and Hermione exchanged a glance, a look that suggested to Harry that they knew another reason the Slytherins had done well. “I hope so. Thanks for calling me on the pendant after the class to let me know,” said Pansy.

“I just wish you could have been there. Anyway, they did fantastic. Not only the two 100’s, but Hedrick and Augustina were both at 94, Vivian at 91, and David at 90.”

“Wow...” marveled Pansy. “That’s so great. If you’d told me they were all in the eighties, I’d have been happy with that. Of course, they’ve been doing it longer than the others too, since we started in August. This is going to get a lot of attention around the school.”

“Yeah, it will,” agreed Harry. “The Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw class knew about the 100's because Hermione told them, and they seemed kind of discouraged that none of them did better than 80 either. They had improved over two months ago, and I told them that. When they asked why the Slytherins had done so well, I explained that they banded together strongly last year while fighting Malfoy, and by keeping track of Malfoy and the others; they had a mission, and they had to stick together to do it. Not that you need a mission, I told them, but it helps to be close, to do things together.”

“That may be a good aspect of what happened,” suggested Neville. “If the other classes ask why the Slytherins did so well, and they probably will, you can explain that to them. The fact that they work together so well can be sort of a model for other classes.”

“That’s true, I hadn’t thought of that,” said Harry. “It can be something to aim for, not something to be jealous of. I wonder if Luna, Helen, and Sylvia are going to get asked to help other groups.”

“That would be funny, other students asking Luna for help like that,” remarked Ron. “Considering the opinion that people have always had of her.”

“Yes, it reminds me of that Christmas song, ‘Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,’” said Hermione, drawing puzzled looks from the others. “You would know the song, Harry, but for the rest of you...” She recited the lyrics, then continued, “So, the other reindeer didn’t like him, because he was different. But then when it turned out to be useful, all of a sudden they loved him, they wanted him to help. I always felt like Rudolph should have made sure they understood how wrong they’d been before he agreed to help them.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “I hadn’t thought of it like that, but I see your point. Kind of makes the song more depressing.”

“Leave it to Hermione to read deep meaning into a children’s song,” said Ron, rolling his eyes.

“But it really is a comment about human nature, an allegory, even if it is unintentional,” protested Hermione. “That’s the way most people are. Harry’s experienced both sides of that. His aunt and uncle treated him badly because he was a wizard—different—and people in the wizarding world treated him better because he was different in a good way, when neither had to do with who he really was.” No one had any immediate comment. “Well, it’s true,” she muttered.

“I have a feeling that Luna would help anyone if they asked her,” said Pansy. “As I found out last year, like this Rudolph, she seems not to hold grudges.”

“Maybe she can advise people that one way to help reach the state necessary is to not hold grudges,” suggested Neville humorously.

“Makes sense,” agreed Harry. He realized that probably no other students would have developed the ability to use the energy of love so quickly. Still, three had, which was three more than he had expected. He resumed his lunch, reveling in the satisfaction he felt. Three was a good start.



## CHAPTER 15

### GRINDELWALD

Snape resumed the sessions four days later, and did not comment on what had happened that Sunday, though Harry found him even less chatty than usual. To Harry's great surprise, when Snape discovered the Memory Charm, he made no comment at all. Harry almost wished Snape had, so he would have a better idea of where things stood with him. Still, considering what had happened, a lack of open hostility was probably as much as Harry could hope for. There appeared to be no consequences to Blaise either, at least that Harry could see.

Over the next four weeks, all was normal at Hogwarts, but Voldemort and the Death Eaters were stepping up their activities. Not only was there an increase in killings, both of wizards and especially Muggles, but also Voldemort led jailbreaks at Australia's only wizard prison, and both American ones. Over two hundred wizards escaped in all, and it was assumed that at least some would be induced to join Voldemort. On the first Saturday of December, at lunch with Neville and some of the Aurors, Harry was surprised to discover that not all of the Aurors had a gloomy view of the jailbreaks.

"It's going to make our lives a bit more difficult, no question," acknowledged Kingsley after swallowing the last of his food. "But from reading the Prophet, it seems a lot of people don't realize that these are not exactly ready-to-go Death Eaters that he's recruiting. Some are petty criminals, and a lot of the more serious criminals aren't the type that are going to be eager to become Death Eaters; Voldemort demands a certain discipline that most criminals who've always operated independently are going to have a hard time adapting to."

Harry almost commented, 'Not to mention that they're not going to agree to the Cleansing,' before he remembered that he was the only one there with knowledge of it. Before he thought of something else to say, Neville spoke. "But we should assume he put them under the Imperius Curse, right?"

"At first, yes," agreed Kingsley, "but it would be a lot of work to keep two hundred people under the Imperius Curse for any length of time. What he needs are willing helpers, and that's going to be tougher for him now. We're pretty sure Harry's put a damper on his recruiting pitch. He can't exactly say, 'come join the strongest wizard in the world' and have it be credible. So, even though some of the new ones may have to be coerced into joining him, they may be his best bet. He can reasonably hope that they're not aware of what you can do to him, and he can always do a Memory Charm on anyone who seems like they might be a good recruit but hesitates to join him because of Harry, make them forget they ever heard of Harry."

"Well, if they have to go that far, then that's really a good sign," said Neville, prompting nods of agreement around the table. Harry wondered what Snape would have to say about it, but Snape was away for the weekend; he wondered whether Snape was helping train or otherwise deal with those who had been broken out of prison.

Kingsley looked at Harry. "By the way, I wanted to mention at some point that a few days ago, Dawlish and I met with our American counterparts to talk about the prison breaks and compare notes. They asked about you, and about the energy of love. I told them about it, and that you were working with some Aurors."

"I hadn't thought about that," said Harry. "Am I well-known in America?"

"You're not a household word like you are here, but people who read the newspapers will have heard of you, and definitely the American Aurors know about you now, since like us they keep abreast of Dark wizarding developments internationally. They know that you've faced him a few times, and the Cruciatius and Killing Curse shields were big news at the time in international wizarding circles,

not only here. Anyway, the Americans were interested in meeting you, but I put them off, told them how busy you were. I had a feeling it wasn't the kind of thing you'd be keen on doing."

"Kingsley has amazing observational skills," remarked Tonks.

Harry nodded. "Not that I'd mind meeting them especially, but yes, I can think of a lot of things I'd rather be doing with the time. Do you think they might help us out?"

"We mentioned the idea to them. They were... noncommittal, which I expected. They have their own problems too, though not nearly so many as we do; they say they're stretched a bit thin. Like us, they don't have as many Aurors in their ranks as they'd like. I think they'd help out in emergencies, but not on a day-to-day basis."

Harry and Neville asked a few more questions about the international wizarding situation, then got up and followed Kingsley to the training area. Alone with him and Neville, Harry asked a question he'd wanted to ask at the table but hadn't for security reasons. "How are the relays coming along?"

"We're starting to deploy them," said Kingsley. "Our projections are that we can have England completely covered in four months, with another month for Scotland and Northern Ireland. After that, hopefully, we'll be able to know where Voldemort is if he's anywhere in Britain. Sooner, if we get lucky and drop a relay in the right place."

"What do you mean, 'hopefully?'" asked Neville before Harry could.

"We can't know for sure that he won't come up with some sort of countermeasure," pointed out Kingsley. "We think he doesn't know about this, but it's not impossible that he could've gotten to one of the researchers that Hermione was working with. If so, it's possible that he could find a way to avoid being tracked, like imbue some clothing with a spell that blocks the signal. I'm not saying I think it's likely, just that it could happen."

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Harry.

Kingsley shrugged lightly. “Just one of those little things you learn from being around a while. Things often don’t go as planned, including things a lot more certain than this. This is totally new, so things could go wrong even if Voldemort doesn’t know. Of course, it’s also possible that Voldemort could find out, and be unable to do anything about it. We’ll just have to see what happens.”

“Assuming everything goes right, I guess eventually he’d have to go to another country, right?” wondered Neville. “What would we do then?”

Kingsley chuckled wryly. “To quote the Minister, ‘then, he becomes someone else’s problem.’”

Harry’s mouth dropped open in astonishment; he was amazed that Bright would be so cavalier. “He said that? What the... what kind of attitude is that?”

“A very political one,” said Kingsley. “But I should add, it was made at least partly in jest. It’s not as though he doesn’t care personally about the people in other countries who Voldemort could kill. It was more of a recognition of the political reality that most British wizards would say ‘thank goodness he’s gone,’ and not clamor to put resources into tracking him down if he’s not bothering us anymore. I’m sure we would help whoever ends up with him; I hope we would give them the intelligence on the relays, and give them the means to make their own if they wanted. Of course, there would be some who wouldn’t want to do that; they’d fear, reasonably, that the intelligence could be compromised, and Voldemort could use it to find a defense against the detection, in which case our advantage would be lost. In politics, Harry, acts of altruism are very rare. People look out for their own first.”

Harry’s mind flashed back to McGonagall telling him to finish evacuating the Hogwarts wounded after the fire, while wounded attackers lay dying. He knew it wasn’t the same as all of what Kingsley was saying, just the last sentence. “I assume that Bright knows that I’m not going to just shrug if that happens.”

“I think that’s safe to say,” said Kingsley. “Look, Harry, I don’t want you to judge him based on that. When you repeat a remark like that, you lose tone of voice, facial expressions, and context. I know you wouldn’t be happy with what he

said no matter how he said it, but I do think it came across differently when he said it.”

“If you say so,” said Harry doubtfully, as Dawlish entered the room.

“Ah, thanks for coming,” said Kingsley to Dawlish. “Harry, Neville, what we’re going to start on now is one of the more important aspects of being an Auror: the ability to detect Dark magic. The fact is, not every Auror can do this. You can still be an Auror even if you can’t, it’s just very helpful. Some can’t at first, then gradually develop the ability. It’s very tricky, very sensitive.

“Dark magic is very powerful, and therefore the easiest kind of magic to sense in ways other than the standard five senses. The way to start trying to do it is to clear your mind, to turn off the other five senses as much as you can. If you’re sensitive to it at all, you may feel something, even if you don’t know what it is.”

“But Harry can do this already, can’t he?” asked Neville. “I mean, the department store attack... he sensed it just before it happened.”

“Yes, I was going to mention that,” agreed Kingsley. “Clearly, Harry has the potential to do this. The question is whether it’ll only manifest itself in life-threatening situations, or if it’s dependable and can be refined. So, Harry, let’s give it a try.” He handed Harry a thick blindfold. “Put this on, and I’ll enchant Dawlish so that he makes no noise whatsoever. He’ll do a test Dark spell on me; what we want you to do is see if you can tell when it’s happening, and see if you can come close to identifying where he’s standing, where the spell originated.”

Harry nodded as he put the blindfold on. He immediately cleared his mind, something which came easily to him after so much practice. He focused on remembering what it had felt like on the occasions when he had sensed Dark magic being done nearby, and when he had worked on this with Dumbledore. He was surprised that Dumbledore apparently hadn’t mentioned to the Aurors that they’d worked on refining his skill; his next thought was that he shouldn’t be thinking, and refocused on emptying his mind.

After a minute, he felt something. He knew it was what he'd felt before, and he even knew where it was coming from, though he didn't think about how he knew. He pointed his wand to his right and fired the Blue spell. A second later he heard Kingsley say, "Um, okay, I think you can take the blindfold off."

Harry did, and looked to his right to see a blue Dawlish looking at him in surprise. "I hadn't even done the damn spell yet, though I was just about to. I would ask you how you did that, but I never get a very good answer when I do, so I think I won't bother."

"Yes, I'm afraid I really couldn't tell you," agreed Harry. "This was the first time I ever tried to get the location, so I'm glad that worked. I can see where this would be really useful."

"That's putting it mildly," said Kingsley. "This is a big part of being an Auror, and not many of us could do what you just did. Hell, you might be able to track a Dark wizard even if he wasn't using magic at the moment. Dumbledore could do that, and a few of us can; it's just a question of how close you'd have to be."

"How could you track them if they weren't using magic?" asked Neville.

"Dark wizards have a particular frame of mind," explained Kingsley, "and even if they're not using magic at that moment, it's as though there's a constant, low-level use of magic at all times. We all have that, actually, it's just much more noticeable with Dark wizards. When we have some more time, maybe over vacation, we should see if we can test that. Someone could walk around our facility, and we'd see if you could track them, with them sometimes doing magic and sometimes not doing it. Dawlish could do it, but Snape would be better, if he'd be willing."

"I'll talk to him about it," agreed Harry. He was interested to find out whether he could; he knew it could be very important to be able to see a Dark wizard coming even if they weren't using magic.

The next day was the day Harry was supposed to pick out the Slytherin Quidditch team; the new stadium was not completed, but the hoops were up, meaning teams could now practice. He met Thomas after lunch to make sure they both knew how the situation was to be presented: Harry and Thomas would be together as those trying out were put through their paces, but everyone would be told that Thomas would decide the team, and that Harry was simply there to tell the aspirants what they should do. Snape had agreed to Harry's request not to be known as the one picking the team; Harry felt that the second years, especially after taking flying lessons from Ron, were more likely to win positions, and he didn't want the second years or anyone else to think that favoritism had influenced his decision. Snape had rolled his eyes at Harry's request, but could find no reason to object. Thomas found it slightly mystifying, but didn't object either.

To Harry's surprise, not that many Slytherins tried out for the team; he wondered if their poor Quidditch performance during the Malfoy era had caused a decrease in enthusiasm for Quidditch in Slytherin. There were thirteen aspirants for six positions, six of whom were second years. Harry noted with amusement that the six second years were trying out for different positions, so none would be in competition with another; he assumed they had worked it out among the ten of them before the tryouts.

Speaking alone again after the tryouts, Harry asked Thomas his opinion, mainly to see if it differed from his. "Well, I don't have that much experience, which is why you're choosing the team and not me, but I thought the second years were really good. A few positions were tossups, though." Harry agreed, and explained the desirability of choosing younger players. He was uncomfortable choosing six second years, because of his relationship with them, but he knew it was what he would do if it were his team, or even if he had no relationship with them.

Harry spent most of his free time the following week working on his Ring of Reduction, which was due for presentation the last Monday before Christmas vacation. He found that he was beginning to regret having chosen a four-room ring,

as his mother had; it was a lot of work, and Hermione was the only one of his friends who had done so. He was both amused and amazed to hear her complain at one point that there couldn't be a nine-room Ring, and wondered whether she would really take on the task if she could. He decided she probably would.

On Friday afternoon, the first twenty minutes of Harry's seventh-year Defense Against the Dark Arts class was spent on the energy of love, after which everyone went outside for combat flying instruction. Harry had a good idea of how to teach it, from having talked to Kingsley and Ron, and from reading parts of a few books. It was their third lesson on the topic; the first two had been spent mostly on formation flying, and this one was the first in which they attempted spells while flying and maneuvering. Not surprisingly, those with Quidditch experience did far better than those without it.

In addition to formation flying, he spent some time on one-on-one airborne duels, which Harry and Ron had also practiced over the past few Sundays. Harry illustrated the difference with normal dueling by asking Ron and Neville to have a few duels. To Neville's annoyance, Ron won all three duels due to his greater adeptness on a broom. Harry explained to the class that on the ground, Neville would beat Ron ninety-five times out of a hundred, but in the air, Ron had a strong natural advantage. Not only was he more maneuverable, but his greater flying experience allowed him to predict his opponent's movements more easily. Harry explained that he didn't expect everyone to become expert fliers by the end of the class, but that he wanted them to understand their strengths and weaknesses in any given situation.

As had become usual when they had class outside, Harry called a halt five minutes early to give the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors time to get to History of Magic. As was also usual, Harry fell in with his friends heading back to the castle. Walking next to Hermione, he remarked, "You're getting pretty good at flying."

Before she could answer, Ron said, "Of course she is, you made it part of the school curriculum. Did you expect her to do anything else?"



“It’s not only because of that,” responded Hermione casually. “The castle really could come under attack, and I want to be able to fly well. One reason I never bothered with flying was that there was never such a practical use for it; now there is. Anyway, I’m glad you think I’m doing well,” she added, to Harry.

“I’m not going to ask you to comment on how I’m doing,” said Neville. “I think we all just saw that for ourselves.”

Harry couldn’t tell if Neville was dispirited, or just poking fun at himself. “C’mon, Neville, Ron’s been flying all his life. You can’t expect to pick it up quite that fast.”

Neville shrugged. “I know, I just expected to do better than I did. I thought I would win at least one.” To Ron, he added, “You were moving around so much, I don’t think anything I did ever touched you.”

“Well, that was the idea,” said Ron, sounding almost apologetic. “I had some practice with Harry, that’ll get you good real fast. I mean, you’re really good at dueling, and I’m good on a broom; Harry’s both. Hard to imagine who could take him in a flying duel, come to think of it.”

“Does Voldemort fly?” asked Pansy. “I mean, if he does, is he any good?”

“I think we don’t know that,” said Harry. “He probably hasn’t flown for a while, hasn’t needed to. But he got good at most everything important for a wizard, so it’d be hard to imagine that he didn’t get good at flying.”

“But is he even going to show up if there’s an attack on Hogwarts?” wondered Pansy. “He’ll know you’ll be there, and he’ll know he’s in trouble if you get near him.”

“Yes, but he does have that device,” pointed out Harry, “so the worst that’ll happen to him is that he goes unconscious and gets sent back to wherever his headquarters is; he can always come back when he wakes up. Which is why I’ve got to find the damn thing. Hermione, I don’t suppose there’s any spell that gets people’s clothes off?”

She raised an eyebrow for a second. “In any other situation I’d assume you were joking, but I can see why you’re asking. No, there isn’t, not that I know of.”

“Yes, but you wouldn’t know, would you?” said Ron. “I mean, I know there are... adult spells, but I kind of doubt the library has books on that.” Hermione glanced at Ron, then looked ahead again; Ron’s eyebrows shot up. “It does? There are? You did?”

Harry could see Hermione trying not to look embarrassed, as she glanced around to make sure they weren’t being overheard. “There are a couple, and yes, I looked through them a bit last year. I was just curious,” she added defensively, giving Ron a look that warned him not to make fun of her. “They’re in the Restricted section, of course. There’s a section on Vanishing clothing and taking it off with magic, but nothing that gets it off all at once.” As they walked, Ron gave her a look that suggested that he was interested in hearing more about what she’d read about. Rolling her eyes, she continued, “There’s really nothing that interesting... well, okay, some of it is interesting, but not very useful; a lot of it was kind of strange stuff, that most people would never do. There was a section on Engorgement Charms, which shouldn’t be a surprise, and a section on, um, creative uses of Polyjuice Potion.”

Harry frowned, puzzled. “What would people do with... oh, you mean, they’d become someone else, so they could...”

She nodded, keeping her voice down as they approached the castle entrance. “Apparently there’s quite a black market for hair from especially famous and attractive witches and wizards. I try not to judge, but some of those uses... one thing it said some couples do is make Polyjuice Potion, using a hair from each so they can essentially become each other, and then...”

Harry cringed, and saw that he wasn’t the only one to have a strong reaction. “Ewww,” said Ron fervently. “Boy, I have no trouble judging that, that’s just sick. And the scary thing is, I bet there was stuff even weirder than that.”

“I got that impression, but I didn’t read much further than that,” said Hermione. “I decided I didn’t need to know everything after all.”

“Your quest for knowledge ran up against the limits of good taste,” joked Pansy.

“Pretty much,” agreed Hermione.

“I can understand that. Well, here’s where I separate from you guys; the second years will want my account of the class, then we’ll have our session. See you later.”

As Pansy walked away, Neville called after her, “Tell them I put up a good fight.”

“I will,” she shouted over her shoulder. As the rest continued on in the direction of the History of Magic classroom, Harry wondered again whether Neville was actually upset.

Ron looked over at Hermione in puzzlement. “How can you say you don’t judge that, anyway? It’s so disgusting. And since when did you become Miss-I-Don’t-Judge-Things?”

She didn’t quite meet his eyes. “Since this summer,” she said, sounding as though she was trying to keep emotion out of her voice. Ron looked abashed, clearly thinking he should have been able to predict her answer. “I remembered a phrase I’d heard a long time ago: ‘Judge not, lest ye be judged.’ It seemed to have a certain... relevance to my situation.” As they walked on in silence, Harry realized that while he hadn’t thought about what Hermione had suffered over the summer for quite a while, she clearly had.

They arrived to History of Magic five minutes early; Harry noticed that there were six more people there than usual, all Ravenclaws. A few minutes later, Dentus walked in and greeted them. “Good afternoon, all. A reminder before we start: next Friday will be the last class before winter vacation, so your mid-term essays will be due at the beginning of that class.” Harry again felt grateful that

Dentus had not required him to do homework for the class; he couldn't imagine where he would have found the time to write an essay, never mind research it.

"You recall, I hope," continued Dentus humorously, "that for the last fifteen minutes of the last class, I gave you some background on the war which the Muggles refer to as World War II. As you know, certain wizarding historical events occur very independently of the situation in the Muggle world, while others are inextricably linked to it. What we will discuss today falls into the latter category.

"You may also recall that in the first lesson, Harry briefly mentioned that Professor Dumbledore had talked to him about the events of that period, events in which Professor Dumbledore was heavily involved. In that class, Harry said that he would speak to the class about those events at some point in the future; today will be that day. But before I turn the floor over to Harry... you may have noticed that we have a few extra people here today. I told the other seventh year class that Harry would be talking about this today, and some of them asked to sit in on this class. I agreed, as did Harry." Dentus gestured for Harry to come forward.

Harry got up and walked to near where Dentus was standing, a few feet to his left. "Harry, I have a question before you start. You said before that you were sure he wouldn't mind you talking about this. How are you so sure of that?"

Dentus had told Harry before the class that he would be asking that, so that the students could be sure that Harry wasn't violating Dumbledore's privacy. Harry had had enough time to prepare his answer. "I talked to him about this a lot, and I asked him if it was all right to talk to other people about it. He said yes, he didn't mind." Harry didn't add the detail that all of those conversations had occurred after Dumbledore died.

Harry turned to the class. "From what Albus told me... okay, wait. I should say before I continue that for some time before he died, he wanted me to call him 'Albus,' and I kind of got into the habit of doing it. So, I'm just going to use his name that way here, which I'm also sure he wouldn't mind."

He paused to remember what he was going to say, then continued. “Apparently Grindelwald started becoming well-known among the wizarding population around 1943, though he was well-known to the Aurors before then. I should say that Albus wasn’t an Auror, but he had connections to them, and was friends with some of them. He didn’t have a job; he had enough money, and he spent his time after graduating from Hogwarts traveling around the world, exposing himself to different cultures, different types of magic. Sometimes he would just travel through a country; sometimes he’d stay and help them find Dark wizards for a while, or if he found a wizard he could learn something from, stay and ask to be taught. The longest he stayed in any one place was one year, in Tibet. He studied more mysticism than magic there; he said it was the most important year of his life. He—yes, Hermione?”

“Did he say exactly why it was so important?” she asked.

“Kind of,” replied Harry, “but not exactly in those words. They taught him about meditation, which was a big influence on him. He was already a fairly calm and peaceful person; what they taught him helped him strengthen that. It helped him with mental discipline, it helped him become the person he ended up being. Mandy?”

“You’ve said that he used the energy of love, he just didn’t realize that was what it was. In the energy-of-love sections of our class, you’ve had us doing stuff that’s a lot like meditation. Was there any connection between the time he spent there, and his using the energy of love?”

Good question, he thought. “I don’t know; I’m not even sure that he would. It wouldn’t be surprising, but he was already pretty powerful before he started traveling. I don’t recall him saying that there was an increase in his power at any particular point.

“Anyway, he had planned on staying longer, but as the war continued, he felt that he should go back to England and help out. Not with the war itself, of course; as Professor Dentus has already explained, all countries’ wizards stayed out of it.

But the war created a really good environment for Dark wizards. You see, Dark wizards get off on killing people. It gives them a feeling of power, it sort of feeds their... negative energy, you could say. Normally, the number of people—right now, I mean Muggles—they kill isn't that high, because killing all the people they wanted would get them noticed, even by Muggles, and increase their chances of being captured. But in that war, people were constantly dying, and not just on the battlefield—lots of bombs were being dropped on cities, and lots of people were dying from that, too. In that kind of environment, it was a lot easier for Dark wizards to do what they wanted to do. They could just go to the site of a bombing, kill one, or five, or ten people, and if they wanted to not attract attention, disfigure the bodies so it looked like bomb damage. The Muggles never knew. Albus understood that was what was going on, and that the wizarding community had to be more aggressive in hunting down Dark wizards who did that. The fact is, a lot of wizards didn't really care about it. As long as the Dark wizards were killing Muggles and not wizards, they figured, Muggles are dying by the thousands anyway because of their stupid war, why should we risk ourselves trying to protect them?"

Susan raised her hand. "Are you sure that most wizards were really like that? It seems really cold, a really awful attitude."

Harry looked at Dentus with an unspoken question. "I was a child, only seven years old at the time that Harry's talking about," said Dentus, "so I can't speak from personal experience, and I have no specific historical knowledge of that one way or the other. But from my experience as a Ministry undersecretary, I find it utterly believable. Much of the wizarding community, frankly, looks down on Muggles, considers them barely worthy of our notice. Also, in every kind of community, both wizard and Muggle, there is a strong tendency to 'look after one's own.' At such a time as Harry is talking about, there would have been great strains on the wizarding community, from living in a wartime environment. Food was relatively scarce, wizards were sometimes injured or killed by bombs, and so forth. I have no doubt that many wizards would have said, we'll look after our own first,

and if we have any resources after that, maybe we'll help the Muggles." Dentus waited for follow-up questions, and seeing none, turned the floor back over to Harry.

"Albus, of course, didn't have that attitude," continued Harry, "and he went to work trying to catch Dark wizards who were feeding off the Muggles' misfortune. He found allies: some other wizards who felt like he did, and a few Muggles who knew about the wizarding world and kept their eyes open for deaths that looked suspicious. It wasn't easy to catch Dark wizards, of course, because they could just Apparate at will, and most were careful enough not to kill where there were too many witnesses."

Neville raised a hand. "What were the Aurors doing at the time?"

"Albus told me that their orders from the Ministry were to focus their attention on where wizards lived, especially places like Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. Some Aurors helped him and the others, in their free time.

"Hmmm, where was I... oh, yes, I was getting to Grindelwald. A lot of people assume that he was that generation's Voldemort, but Albus said that except for the fact that they both used Dark magic and liked killing people, they had almost nothing in common. Voldemort has an organization, and demands loyalty; Grindelwald worked alone. Voldemort craves power; Grindelwald didn't bother with power, at least not the kind that Voldemort wants. Voldemort likes to inspire fear and terror; Grindelwald found that irrelevant. He never would have done anything like the Dark Mark.

"What made Grindelwald the most feared Dark wizard of the time was his body count. He's thought to have killed hundreds of wizards, and thousands of Muggles, far more than Voldemort ever has. Now, I should say, another difference between him and Voldemort is that Voldemort is quite powerful, definitely the most powerful Dark wizard around, and nearly the most powerful wizard, period." Harry tried not to smile as he saw his friends looking at him, greatly amused at what they knew he was thinking. "Grindelwald wasn't an especially powerful wizard, he was

above average at best. What made him dangerous was an artifact he had, one that wasn't known until shortly before he was defeated. It was a one-of-a-kind Dark artifact, a ring. If a wizard killed while wearing it, he got... a power boost, you could say. He absorbed some of the life energy of the person he killed. It made him more powerful, but for a limited time. Albus wasn't sure, but he thought it was about forty-eight hours. That was the reason he killed so much, besides the fact that he liked it: it kept him more powerful than he otherwise would have been."

The students looked spellbound, and Dentus raised both eyebrows. "Fascinating," he commented. "I'm quite familiar with this period, and I didn't know this. The information must have been very closely held."

Harry nodded. "Albus said that no more than a half dozen people knew it, and they all agreed that it was best kept a secret. They were afraid that if it became known, other Dark wizards might try to get the ring for themselves."

Ernie raised a hand. "So, what happened to the ring?"

Before Harry could answer, a smiling Justin said, "Getting ideas, are you?"

The class laughed, including Harry. Ernie rolled his eyes and looked over at Justin. "Yes, Justin, you know how I've always wanted to be a powerful Dark wizard. But now my secret is out, and it's all your fault."

Harry was surprised; he wasn't sure he'd ever heard Ernie make a joke like that, or any joke, for that matter. Looking a bit surprised as well, Justin responded, "See, I knew the whole Head Boy thing was just an act."

"Well, to answer Ernie's question," said Harry, "or, I guess I should say, to not answer it... obviously I wouldn't tell you even if I knew, but I don't know, and Albus didn't know. It was given to one person at the Ministry, someone who all those who knew trusted; that person was to dispose of it. With the others' agreement, he gave them Memory Charms so they would forget about the existence of the ring in the first place."



Harry paused to take a breath, but Ernie's hand shot up. "Um, Harry... the obvious question here is, if Dumbledore was given a Memory Charm to cover this up, then how did he know enough to tell you this?"

Harry paused, kicking himself mentally for not having seen the question coming; it was, in fact, obvious. He wondered whether telling twenty people would be enough for the secret to get out, then made an impulsive decision. "The answer to that is something I'd really rather wasn't commonly known. Do you all think you can keep it to yourselves if I tell you?"

Most students looked eager to know, and Harry saw surprised looks on Neville, Ron, and Hermione's faces. "As long as we don't have to sign a piece of parchment saying we will," muttered a dark-haired Ravenclaw named Lisa Turpin, sitting at the back of the room.

A hush fell. Harry looked over at Hermione, who looked down, obviously embarrassed. Harry took a step forward. "Lisa, if you'd rather not be here, you're welcome to leave," he said coldly.

She glared at him in response. "Marietta's my friend. Besides, you're not the teacher of this class."

Without missing a beat, Dentus replied, "Quite right; I am. Please leave, Miss Turpin." Looking slightly surprised, Turpin looked at Dentus, who stared back, expressionless. She picked up her bag and left the room. Harry was surprised as well; he assumed Dentus had dismissed her for her disrespect to Harry, who was a Hogwarts teacher, even if not the teacher of that class. Harry wasn't sure whether Dentus knew about the incident with Marietta, or that it involved Hermione.

Harry was about to speak again, but Hermione did first. Turning to the remaining five Ravenclaws, she said quietly, "Look, not that it's any of Lisa's business, or yours, but I sent Marietta an owl in August, apologizing for what I did. A lot of people in this class signed that, and I should have told you what you were signing."

Padma shook her head. “Don’t worry, Hermione. This is a Lisa thing, not a Ravenclaw thing. Remember, I was one of the ones Marietta almost got in serious trouble, if not for what Dumbledore did. You were trying to protect us, and I don’t blame you for a minute for what happened.” Hermione nodded gratefully, but didn’t look as though she felt much better about what had happened.

Harry decided he should resume his story, though he knew now he wouldn’t tell them what he’d intended to; he was no longer in a frame of mind where he felt comfortable trusting twenty people to keep a potentially embarrassing secret. “Okay, getting back to the story. Until Grindelwald was caught, nobody knew about the ring, so everyone assumed he was just a very powerful wizard who really liked to kill lots of people. He killed more Muggles than wizards; he would rather have killed wizards, but killing wizards was much riskier, because the Aurors were spending all their time making sure wizards were safe, and because wizards could possibly fight back in a way Muggles couldn’t. Grindelwald preferred to kill wizards because they gave him more power; killing wizards gave him three or four times as much power as killing Muggles did. He still did it, just very carefully.

“They had a very hard time with Grindelwald, because he didn’t care about anything but killing. With Voldemort... well, look at what happened with me. All I did was say his name, and encourage others to do it. He could have just ignored me, and he’d be much farther along in his plans by now. But he keeps trying to kill me, and he keeps putting more and more effort into—” He stopped talking as he saw a hand go up. “Dean?”

“Yes, but he thought he’d be able to kill you easily,” pointed out Dean. “He didn’t know it would be this hard; this wasn’t part of his plan.”

“Yes, but that’s part of my point exactly,” said Harry. “He failed, and was unhappy that he failed, because whenever he tried to kill someone before, they ended up dead. The fact that I’m still alive really annoys him, and not just because I’m now a threat to him, but because it’s a blow to his ego, power, and status—it makes him look bad that he can’t kill me, and so he keeps trying. He has a need to

be seen a certain way. Grindelwald, on the other hand, wouldn't have let himself get sidetracked like that. Albus could have called him every name in the book in the Prophet, and Grindelwald would have just ignored it, and kept on killing. It's harder to beat an opponent who's distracted by fewer things.

“Albus spent most of 1944 trying to protect Muggles and hunt down Dark wizards, not just Grindelwald. He tried to help Muggles where he could, but he knew there was only so much he could do, and it pained him not to be able to do more for them, when there was so much suffering all around him.” Dean raised his hand again, and Harry called on him.

“Yes, a question for Professor Dentus... you said last week that tens of millions were killed around that time; that Russia killed millions of its own people, and Germany killed millions of Jewish people. I assume the reason that wizards didn't try to stop that is that we're not supposed to get involved in Muggle affairs, and Harry, is that what you meant when you said 'there was only so much he could do?'”

Dentus responded first. “Yes, though it was talked about. Hitler's plans for the Jews were known to Ministry wizards, and high-ranking wizards in America and some European countries, well before most Muggles were aware of it. Doing something to intervene was discussed, but the only real way to do anything would have been to remove or manipulate Hitler, and no one was willing to interfere in Muggle affairs so directly, for reasons you already know. Even hardheaded wizards hated to see so much death, but it was decided at an international wizarding conference that even at such a cost, staying out of Muggle affairs was more important than ever. If we intervened, we would essentially be taking over, and no one wanted that. Harry?”

Looking at Dean, Harry said, “Yes, that was what he meant. He agreed with the decision; he knew it would be bad for wizards to take over. It was just very hard for him. He saw so much death, and if I know one thing from knowing him, it's that it pained him greatly to see people suffer, to know what the families of the

dead went through. He did sometimes intervene in small ways, saving Muggle lives when he could and when it wouldn't be noticed by too many people, giving those he saved Memory Charms if he had to use magic to do it, which he usually did. He was reprimanded once by the Ministry after a wizard happened to see him doing that, but he continued anyway. But yes, he knew there was only so much he could do.

“In 1944, he came close to catching Grindelwald a few times. By late 1944, the Allies were winning the war, and most of the action was in continental Europe. Grindelwald went there, and so did many Dark wizards, so they would have more opportunities to kill. Albus went there as well, along with the people he had been working with in England. Obviously, he didn't care about the nationality of the people he saved. Twice in late 1944 he got very close to Grindelwald, but Grindelwald Disapparated before Albus could get close enough to do anything to him. Yes, Mandy?”

“How did Professor Dumbledore find him? I mean, was it luck, or eyewitnesses, or what?”

“It was partly luck, and partly his ability to sense Dark wizards. Some wizards—and Aurors are trained in this—have the ability to sense Dark magic being used somewhere near them. That was how he captured a lot of the Dark wizards he did—he would go to where there was a bombing, some place likely for Dark wizards to go, and if there was one close enough, he could sense them. He'd usually capture them if he could get close enough to them so he could put down an anti-Disapparation field before they were aware of him. The times he missed Grindelwald it was because Grindelwald happened to Disapparate before Albus could get close enough to him to put down the field, not because he saw Albus coming.”

Justin raised a hand. “Can you sense Dark wizards?”

Harry paused for a few seconds, trying to figure out whether that was a security matter or not; he wasn't sure how aware Voldemort was of his ability.

“Well, yes, I’m getting a very strong sense from Ernie right here,” he joked, gesturing to Ernie. The class laughed heartily as Ernie rolled his eyes.

After the laughter died down, Harry looked at Hermione, asking a silent question. She said nothing, but he quickly got an emotional impression from her via Fawkes, one of holding back, not communicating. Understanding, but wondering why she didn’t say it verbally, he spoke to the class again. “Seriously, though, I’m going to not answer that question. If I do have that ability, I’d rather he found out the hard way. And if I don’t, I’d rather he worried that I did.

“To continue... in early 1945, Albus got close enough to put down an anti-Disapparation field onto him, but as soon as he saw Albus, Grindelwald Disapparated, defeating Albus’s field. Albus was discouraged, since this was to him proof that Grindelwald was a stronger wizard than he was, and Albus was one of the strongest wizards of his generation.

“Even though Albus kept getting closer to him, Grindelwald kept doing what he’d been doing, he didn’t change his habits. He assumed that no one wizard was a threat to him, and he knew that Albus wasn’t looking for him specifically, just for Dark wizards killing Muggles unobtrusively. Yes, Anthony?”

“How do you know what Grindelwald thought?”

Harry nodded. “Good question; it’ll be answered naturally in the course of the story. So... about a month later, in March 1945, as the war was starting to wind down, Albus got as close to Grindelwald as he ever had. He was able to sneak up on him and Stun him, then he did the spell that wraps the person in ropes after taking his wand. Right at this point, Muggles started showing up. Normally, Albus would have Apparated them both directly to Auror headquarters in England, but he knew it would be a major violation of wizarding secrecy to do that right then. He quickly Disillusioned Grindelwald, so the Muggles couldn’t see him, and he levitated him away, at his side.

“While he took Grindelwald to a place where they couldn’t be seen, he did Legilimens on him. He started calling up memories, which answers your question,

Anthony. He got a lot of information in a few minutes, including about the ring. As they approached a place where Albus could Apparate him away, Grindelwald woke up. Albus didn't notice for a few seconds, and that was all Grindelwald needed. Albus still doesn't know how, but Grindelwald broke out of the ropes; Albus assumed afterwards that he had a second wand somewhere that he was able to reach somehow, or even just touch. Before Albus had a chance to do anything, Grindelwald Disappeared.

“Albus felt horrible, of course. He blamed himself, figured he'd been careless. All he could think about for the next few weeks, the next month, was how many people would be killed because of his mistake. Ernie?”

“Why didn't he just kill Grindelwald when he had the chance?”

Harry nodded grimly. “Albus said that everyone he talked to who knew what happened asked him that question. Killing Dark wizards wasn't uncommon at that time, I should point out. These days, Aurors need special permission to do it, permission that was last given about seventeen years ago, when Voldemort was strong before. But then, an Auror could do it and not be questioned. Albus wasn't an Auror, but he had friends who were, and he knew full well that if he carried Grindelwald's dead body into the Ministry, no one would do anything but applaud.

“But the answer to your question, Ernie, is very simple: he thought killing was wrong, and he wouldn't do it. People argued with him about it later; they said, ‘how can it be wrong to kill someone who's killed hundreds, maybe thousands?’ Albus's answer was that if something was wrong, it was wrong in all situations, especially killing. He said that he should have been more careful, that he should have triple-checked that Grindelwald was unconscious at all times. What happened didn't become public knowledge, fortunately for him, but the Aurors and those who knew him fairly well knew about it. He spent a lot of his time over the next few months thinking about it, trying to decide whether he'd done the right thing.

“What didn't help was another bit of information he'd gotten from Grindelwald when he did Legilimens on him. It wasn't only finding out about the

ring, about how he got power from it. Albus discovered that the power Grindelwald got from the ring was addictive. It had an effect on Grindelwald's power, but also his mood. He felt really good right after he killed someone, and if he went a few days without killing anyone, he felt worse than he normally did before he started using the ring. As the war went on, and he killed more and more, he became more and more addicted; he needed to kill more often to get the same feeling. So, after Albus captured Grindelwald and Grindelwald escaped, Albus knew he would continue killing, and do it more and more frequently. It was a huge burden on his conscience; he estimated that Grindelwald killed as much as two or three times a day, and at the end of every day, he would wonder who those people were, imagine their faces..." Harry paused as he felt emotion well up, and waited for it to pass.

"It was an enormous weight on him; he felt worse than he had in his life. He went from focusing on helping Muggles to focusing on catching Grindelwald, and he thought about what he would do differently the next time. He still helped Muggles, of course, it's just that catching Grindelwald was now his main intention. He told himself it was to help the people that Grindelwald would surely kill, but it wasn't until much later that he realized it was more to help his own conscience deal with what had happened. He replayed Grindelwald getting away a hundred times in his head, and started to rethink his refusal to kill. He wondered if it was just an indulgence, so he wouldn't have to feel bad at having killed, while because of him, he felt, more people were being killed every day. Did it matter that he wasn't the one doing the actual killing, he wondered, so long as people were being killed, and he could have prevented it?" As he spoke, Harry flashed back to Snape saying roughly the same words to him the day after Skeeter was killed.

"The war ended in May, at least, the war in Europe. Albus wondered if Grindelwald would go to Japan, where many people were dying in bombings, but he didn't. Albus guessed that Grindelwald would have felt too conspicuous, a white person in a country filled with Asians. There was a sighting of Grindelwald in England in early June, then Albus came back as well. As the summer passed, it was

clear that Grindelwald was still killing. His killing of Muggles was now very conspicuous, and he also killed wizards, about once a week. He was very careful about how he did it, but Albus was sure he would be caught eventually; the question was, how many people would die before he was.

“Albus still couldn’t decide what he would do the next time he faced Grindelwald. He talked to people, all of whom urged him to kill Grindelwald if he had a chance. He visited the wizards in Tibet for a few days, and asked them for their advice. They refused to give him specific advice; they just told him to do what he thought was the right thing to do. It didn’t help him much, since he felt in a way that both of his choices were wrong, and it was a matter of choosing what he felt was least wrong. He returned to England, not feeling any better about the choice he had to make. In the meantime, people kept dying, including two acquaintances and a friend. That made him angry, and in August, he decided that he would kill Grindelwald if he could. Not out of revenge for his friend’s death, but just because it brought home to him all the more how much suffering Grindelwald was causing; it made him feel other people’s pain even more than he had before.

“Finally, in September, he got his chance. Grindelwald, in his addiction, his need to kill, was becoming less careful. Albus found him in Diagon Alley, in a shop that had closed. Grindelwald had just killed the shopkeeper. Albus got to a line of sight, hoping he’d get there before Grindelwald Disappeared. He did, and summoning up as much hate as he could, did the Killing Curse. Grindelwald was dead; Albus took off the ring, and took the body to Auror headquarters.

“Well, as you can probably imagine, it made him a hero. Grindelwald’s killing of so many wizards was a big issue in the wizarding world, and people were really relieved that he was gone. Albus was on the cover of the Prophet for the next week, lots of articles were written about his life. He was given the Order of Merlin, First Class, and treated with great respect by, ironically, the same high Ministry officials who had reprimanded him for using magic to try to save Muggles. He was offered a high position in the Ministry; the Aurors, who had wanted him to join



them before, tried harder than ever to get him to join. He couldn't go anywhere without people stopping and talking to him, thanking him, praising him. It was almost impossible for him to pay for a meal for quite a while.

“You would think that he would be really happy, and he would have thought so too. But he wasn't. He was pleased that Grindelwald was no longer a threat, but other than that, he felt depressed. He put on a smile in public, accepting people's praise and thanks with as much grace as he could, but he was very unhappy. He knew that the reason was that he had killed, and he spent a long time trying to justify it to himself. He told a few close friends how he felt, and they told him the same things he was telling himself; it still didn't do any good.

“One thing that was happening at the same time was that his magical ability suddenly dropped quite a bit. He suddenly couldn't do some difficult spells he had done before, and the effectiveness of all his spells went down very noticeably. Combined with his mood, it put him in a very bad state, and he spent weeks not doing much, wondering what was happening. He had lots of ideas about why it was, but no way to know for sure. The one that he kept coming back to was that this was a message from whatever higher power existed that what he had done was wrong, that what he thought in the first place had been right—killing was wrong, no matter what.”

Lavender raised her hand. “He believed in a higher power?”

“I'm not sure exactly what he believed at that time, but I think he did then, and I know he did when he died,” answered Harry. “Anyway,—yes, Mandy?”

“You've said he was using the energy of love, and he just didn't realize it. What you described happening to his magic after he killed Grindelwald sounds like a change from energy-of-love magic to average magic, and you've told us in classes that it's important not to have negative, hateful thoughts. Did using the Killing Curse cause him to lose the ability to use the energy of love?”

Harry nodded, impressed. “I guess this is why the Sorting Hat is always saying that the Ravenclaws are smart. We can't know it, of course, but yes, he thinks

that's exactly what happened, and it makes perfect sense. Intuitively, I think it must be the case."

"I have another question about that, but a short one first," continued Mandy. "That's the second time you've referred to Professor Dumbledore in the present tense, and I was just wondering why, if there was any reason."

Harry's eyebrows went up; he hadn't noticed. He was thinking of a way to answer when Dentus spoke. "It's not uncommon for people who have lost a loved one to do that. Those of you who read the Prophet regularly know that my wife passed away four months ago, and I find myself referring to her that way. I think it's partly that they were so close to us that we feel as though they're around even if they're not, and partly that my wife and I both believe that we continue to exist in some way after we pass on, in which case she isn't truly gone, just in a different place. I believe that Harry feels that way about Professor Dumbledore."

Harry nodded, grateful for Dentus's intervention and surprised at his having said something as personal as that. "I hadn't even realized I was doing it," he said to Mandy truthfully. "But yes, I'm confident that he's around somewhere. What was your other question?"

Harry guessed that she was surprised by his and Dentus's comments, as she took a few seconds to recall what she had been about to ask. "Does what happened to him mean that you can't kill Voldemort?"

That's the question, isn't it, thought Harry. "No, it just means that if I did, what happened to him would very likely happen to me; I would lose the ability to use the energy of love. Not permanently, though, since it wasn't that way for him."

"Yes," she said, "but suppose you tried to kill him, and failed; you would lose the ability to use the energy of love. That spell you now have, the one that can make him unconscious... you haven't given any details about it, but it has to be an energy-of-love spell. Can you really afford to take that chance? If you have the chance, will you try to kill him?"

The class was rapt, hanging on his next words; Harry thought for a few seconds before answering. “I’d be lying, Mandy, if I said I hadn’t thought about that... a few dozen times. Normally, I wouldn’t answer this question, since I don’t want any information about my intentions to get back to him. But the truthful answer is also one that’s not going to help him if it gets back to him: When the situation happens, I’ll know what to do. I absolutely believe that. Albus told me many times to trust my intuition, and I’m comfortable doing that by now.

“Okay, getting back to Albus... he didn’t feel any better after a couple of months, and he decided to go to Tibet again and talk to the wizards he’d come to trust. At first, they didn’t seem to be of much help; they just told him that this was something he had to go through. He stayed for a week, meditated, had conversations with the wizards there, and he started to understand some things. One was that there are costs to taking a human life, no matter for what reason. He asked them if they thought what he did was wrong; they told him that that was something he had to decide for himself. At one point, he said to one of them that he did what he thought was right. The wizard shook his head and said, ‘You did what you thought was best, not what you thought was right.’ That particular comment had a strong influence on Albus; he hadn’t thought of what happened in quite that way, but he knew it was true. Nothing he was able to do, or say to himself, or have someone say to him was enough to make him comfortable with what he’d done. He went back to England, and mostly stayed out of sight; he was having a hard time dealing with people congratulating him for doing what he had done. He knew that most people in his position would accept what they’d done as necessary, and not think too much about it. He wished he could, but he couldn’t.

“After thinking and agonizing for a few more months, he reached some conclusions. One of the things that the Tibetan wizards had told him was that ‘feelings are the language of the soul,’ and he decided that it was very true for him. His feelings were shouting at him, and he decided to listen to them. He decided never to take another life, no matter what the circumstances, even if doing so could

save a hundred people. He visualized what he wanted the world to be like, and decided to act in the way that he felt the world would be a better place if everyone acted that way. He knew that the world was not that way then, nor would it be anytime in his lifetime, but the only way it ever could be was if people started acting as though it was. He decided never to lie, never to do anything by which he gained at someone else's expense. He also felt during this time that he truly understood for the first time why he'd been Sorted into Hufflepuff. He had qualities that could have put him into Ravenclaw or Gryffindor, but he came to feel that the values that Hufflepuff represented were exactly those that he was starting to embrace very strongly: treating people fairly, doing one's best. Hufflepuff wasn't seen as an attractive House to be put into; everyone can see the appeal of being smart, or brave, or ambitious. But he felt that Hufflepuff values were the ones that, if everyone followed them, the world would be a much better place. Of course," added Harry with a small smile, "he couldn't really say that as headmaster, he had to be fair to all the Houses. But it was what he thought." Harry looked around to see the Hufflepuffs exchange glances; he thought Ernie looked particularly proud.

Susan raised a hand. "How did he justify to himself the idea that he wouldn't kill even to save a hundred lives? I mean, what made him decide to kill in the first place was that he had to stop people from dying. Did he decide he'd been wrong about that?"

Harry thought for a few seconds. "I think you could say he decided that it was wrong for him. He was still pained at the idea that people could die as a result of his failing to kill someone, but he just decided that he always had to do what he thought was the right thing, the thing that would create the world he wanted if everyone did it. He felt that the more people did that, the faster the world would become that place."

"But, really, he knew it wouldn't work that way, didn't he?" asked Mandy. "I mean, he was only one person, though a very important one. He couldn't change the world, he had to know that."

“No, he personally couldn’t,” agreed Harry. “But he felt that we all play a part, we all contribute to making the world what it is; he wanted to do his part to make the world how he wanted it, even though it was only a tiny nudge in that direction. He felt that it would be worth it even if he’d influenced no one else, though of course he did. Last year, I was lucky enough to get to spend a lot of time with him, and just the way he was... I always felt like, I’d really like to be like he is. I didn’t think I ever could, but it felt like it was a good goal to have. I’m sure that I wasn’t the only one who felt that way, and I really believe that the reason he inspired that kind of feeling was that he always did what he thought was right, that he put himself so strongly on that kind of path. And it wasn’t easy; it takes a lot of strength of character to live the way he did, in the position that he was in.”

“How do you mean?” asked Susan.

“Well, for example, how he dealt with Malfoy last year. Especially after Goyle’s attempt on my life in January, Albus knew that Malfoy would at some point try to kill me. Albus... loved me, he cared about me a great deal. He could have expelled Malfoy without cause, to protect me, and those of my friends who got in Malfoy’s way. But he didn’t, because his principles told him that it was wrong to expel any student without a proper and defensible justification. If it was done to Malfoy, it could be done to someone else in the future, for less valid reasons. Upholding the principle meant letting Malfoy stay, and risking the life of someone he loved. It pained him to do it, but he did it. As you all know, Malfoy ended up trying to kill me, and tortured Ginny, and Pansy really badly. Albus suffered for all that, felt responsible. If he was callous and indifferent, it would’ve been easy for him to do what he did. But he wasn’t, and it wasn’t. Most people wouldn’t have done what he did. The more you love and care, the harder it is, and he loved and cared a lot. You all remember the speech he gave when Cedric was killed, about doing the easy and wrong thing versus the difficult and right thing; he lived that. Sometimes it was really hard, but what he went through with Grindelwald convinced him that it was the way he had to be.”

“You’ve said that he was a big influence on you,” said Hannah. “Are you... I’m sorry, this is kind of personal, I’ll understand if you don’t want to answer it, but are you going to try to be like he was about this?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know. But I don’t think I could. If I think about whether I could accept risk to Ginny, or Pansy, or... any of them, and the answer is, no way, I couldn’t; I would do whatever I had to, to protect them. I mean, I have enough...” He paused and chuckled inwardly, thinking of what an understatement it was. “...enough trouble dealing with the danger that they’re in, that anyone’s in, just from being around me.” He glanced at Dentus involuntarily as he spoke. “I should say, though, that he never told me that I should be like that. He said several times that I had to make my own decisions, do what I was comfortable with. He supported decisions I made, like supporting the ARA, even when it wasn’t what he would have done. He said that we learn by making our own decisions, like he did. If somebody makes your decisions for you all your life, then you never learn or grow. So, I may end up like he was; I don’t know. I just don’t think I can ever do what he did, and he says... sorry, he would say that that was fine, that I have to be who I am, that we all do. If we do the best we can, then that’s all we can do.”

Dentus took a few steps toward Harry and addressed the class. “From your expressions, I can see that you feel as I do, that what we heard was... quite riveting. I should say that I was fortunate to consider Professor Dumbledore a friend, but I did not know most of what Harry just told us. Does anyone have any comment on its relevance from a historical point of view?”

Hermione raised her hand, despite Dentus’s earlier suggestion that she not; Harry assumed that it was because Dentus had asked for commentary, rather than a correct answer to a question. No other hands went up, and Dentus gestured to her. “It tells us what he was thinking, why he did what he did, and the extent to which what he did reflected the values of the society of the time,” she said. “In this case, I would say he was quite far ahead of his time, and because he was a prominent person, he had a strong influence. Key people move their societies in their direction,

some a little, some a lot. Some people are a reflection of their society, serving as a focal point for all the influences of their society. Some stand outside it, either pushing for change, or quietly leading and inviting others to join them, which Professor Dumbledore did.”

“Yes, that’s a very good point, Hermione,” agreed Dentus. “Having worked for the Ministry—an organization which one could say can be ‘ethically challenged’—I can say that Albus was greatly respected there, and that many of those who joined Minister Fudge’s crusade against him and Harry two years ago at least were somewhat ashamed of it, which is uncommon for politicians. Yes, Mandy?”

“It occurred to me that he had another kind of influence, a more indirect one. He understood, somehow, that love was Voldemort’s weakness, and he told Harry how to fight him. Harry would never have come up with the energy of love if not for Dumbledore, and Dumbledore wouldn’t have been able to work that out if he hadn’t been the kind of person he was. So, it was very interesting to find out what made him become who he was, and see what kind of decisions he made along the way. Especially because the decisions were so... wrenching.”

“Another good point,” said Dentus. “It also ties in with Hermione’s, in a way. His natural tendency was to do things outside of what his society approved of, such as his determination to help Muggles, even those not being threatened by Dark wizards. The action which secured his fame and influence, and of which his society heartily approved, ironically, was the thing he later decided was wrong. This is one of the lessons of history, of paying attention to more than the names and dates. People are normally rewarded by doing that which their society approves of, and thus gain fame and influence; politicians are the most common example of this. Most people who gain fame and influence like it sufficiently that they seek to gain more, and so make conscious efforts to do what others would want them to do, and gain more approval. In a sense, this is a waste of the influence a person has, since you don’t really change a society by telling it the things it wants to hear. Professor Dumbledore simply did what he thought was right, and so while losing political

influence, gained moral influence among those who admired him, such as myself and Harry, among many others.”

Still standing in front of the class, Harry nodded. “It’s funny, I never thought of his influence as having come from defeating Grindelwald, since it happened so many years ago. I was just very impressed by him personally, who he was, regardless of his being headmaster. Of course, I might not have known him if he hadn’t been the headmaster, and he wouldn’t have been the headmaster, maybe, if he hadn’t killed Grindelwald. But...” He trailed off as he felt a vague feeling of unease, very faint and fleeting. After a few more seconds in which he felt nothing, he said, “Sorry. I was going to say, we all meet people who have an influence on us, and most of them aren’t famous. For example, for me, Ron and Ginny’s parents are...” He paused again as the feeling came back, more strongly this time; horror filled him as he realized what it was.

He stepped forward, to the area where Hermione, Ron, and Neville were sitting. “Someone’s using powerful Dark magic,” he said urgently. “Not close by, but somewhere in Hogwarts. Really strong.”

His friends looked startled, as did the rest of the class. “Are you sure?” asked Ron.

“Oh, yeah, really sure,” affirmed Harry. “If I had to guess, I’d say it was the Killing Curse. Hermione—” He cut himself off as someone started to open the classroom door. “No! Don’t open the door! They’ll be looking for me, they’ll know where I am. The door will be our warning if they get close. Hermione, look at the map.”

She quickly pulled out her map, activated it, and spread it on her desk as the other students watched in surprise. She scanned it, then said to Harry, “There’s no one here who’s not supposed to be.” To the map, she said, “Changes, five minutes!” The map cleared itself, except for some blinking purple dots and names. She looked at Harry, fear in her eyes. “Almost a dozen Slytherins who were in their common room aren’t on the map anymore. I think... they must be dead.”



“Oh, God,” muttered Harry, realizing that what he had sensed was multiple Killing Curses; he fought back emotion and tried to concentrate. Ron leaped out of his chair, standing next to Harry and looking down at Hermione’s desk. Harry glanced at Ron and immediately knew what he was thinking. “Pansy?” he asked Hermione, as he grabbed his pendant. “Pink!” he shouted, as Ron did the same.

“Pansy!” shouted Ron. “Are you there?”

“She’s there, she’s alive,” reported Hermione after she had the map resume its usual functioning. On his pendant and Ron’s, Pansy didn’t respond, but Harry could hear screams.

He and Ron exchanged a terrified glance. As Ron started to say, “We’ve got to—”, Harry put a hand on Ron’s shoulder and Apparated them both to the Slytherin common room. To his shock, he was instantly standing in the middle of a roaring fire. He had barely registered this fact when he unconsciously activated his area-effect fire-suppression spell, and just as suddenly, the fire was out.

The screams stopped, and Harry looked around. A few dozen people were on the floor, coughing and gasping. Ron found Pansy and pulled her to her feet; Harry saw that all of the second years were there. Thank God none were killed, thought Harry quickly. “Are you all right?” asked Ron.

Pansy nodded. “Five of them, Harry, they must be here for you. They threw a fireball at us and left, but not before...” She gestured to the chairs and sofas in the middle of the room, where a number of students were slumped over, clearly dead.

Again, Harry tried to push it out of his mind. “They’ll be heading for the History of Magic classroom, I have to go back there. Ron, use Fawkes and get Madam Pomfrey in here,” he said as Fawkes appeared.

“I’m going with you,” said Pansy, as Harry and Ron stared in surprise. “Really, I’m all right,” she insisted, though the effect was diminished by a cough at the end of the sentence, and her severely singed blonde hair.

Harry would have preferred that she get medical care, but he saw her determination, and he knew he would do the same thing in her place. “All right.” He put a hand on her shoulder and Disapparated.

They were back in the History of Magic classroom; there was a mild gasp at Pansy’s sudden presence and appearance. “Still nothing on the maps?” Harry asked Hermione. She shook her head, clearly mystified that no attackers were showing up. “All right. Pansy—”

He was interrupted by his pendant vibrating in the way that indicated a call from Snape. “Yes, Professor?”

“Professor Potter,” came Snape’s voice, “you must report to Auror headquarters immediately and remain there until further notice.”

“Just as soon as these attackers are dealt with, I promise,” responded Harry with mild sarcasm. He knew that Snape was trying to protect him, and had hoped that Harry didn’t yet know about the attack and would do as he was told.

Harry heard Snape sigh, and wondered whether he was imagining it. “The headmistress’s instructions—”

“The headmistress knows I’m not going anywhere until these people are caught.”

“The Dark Lord will expect that you will remain. His operatives will—”

“Be caught, one by one,” interrupted Harry. “Now, please be quiet. Pansy, what happened?” Harry left the pendant channel open so Snape could listen if he wanted to.

“I was in the second year boys dormitory with all ten, we were having a session,” she reported. “We heard screams from the common room, and we ran in. Five wizards were using Killing Curses, you saw the bodies. Helen, Sylvia, and I started putting up shields, and everyone else started throwing spells at them. I saw two of them heading for the portrait, and one of them threw the fireball at us. It exploded, and you got there a few seconds later, I think.” Harry had heard of

fireballs, but had never seen the effects of one so closely until then; he thought of them as the wizarding world's equivalent of hand grenades, though much worse.

“Okay, we have to start getting everyone out of here, hopefully before they get here,” said Harry. “Hermione, if you could have Flora start—”

Flora suddenly appeared. “Where should she take them?” asked Hermione.

“If you say ‘Auror headquarters,’ I’m not going,” said Justin. “It has to be somewhere in Hogwarts.”

Harry hesitated, as Justin had correctly predicted what Harry would say. “Okay, their common rooms,” he said to Hermione. “There should be at least one person in every common room who can do the spells. Hermione, work it out. Everyone, when you get to your common room, tell everyone what happened, make sure no one leaves. Watch the portrait holes, be ready. I don’t think passwords are going to stop—”

Harry interrupted himself as he got the sense of Dark magic in the vicinity; nearby, but at a low level, so he assumed that the person wasn’t using magic. As Flora took two Ravenclaws away, he tried to localize it, and found that it was almost right outside the door. “Neville,” he whispered, “open the door when I do this.” He made a gesture with his left hand; Neville nodded. Harry walked over to the door, stood against the wall, then made the gesture. The door flew open, and Harry immediately sent out intense feelings of love, hoping they would connect with their target. A man wearing short black robes and a black scarf around most of his face walked in, taking off his scarf as he did so. He appeared to be in his late twenties, shorter than average, with black hair and a thick half-day growth of beard. Harry infused him with the feeling that Harry’s safety was of urgent importance. The man spoke, but Harry didn’t understand any of it. “Damn,” he muttered.

Dentus pointed a wand at the man. “Lexicus,” he said. To Harry, he added, “Translation spell.” Harry nodded his thanks.

The man spoke again; this time, Harry heard him in English. “There are four others,” the man said quickly, handing Harry his wand. “I think they headed

back to the Slytherin area as soon as you went there; I didn't look at my tracking device until just before you came back here. They will be heading here soon." As he spoke, he reached inside his robes and took out wands, eventually handing over three more. Flora took away two more Ravenclaws as Ron appeared with Fawkes; Harry silently asked Fawkes to take two Hufflepuffs back to their common room.

"Madam Pomfrey is with the Slytherins, they'll be okay," reported Ron, looking quizzically at the attacker but seeming to understand the situation.

Harry nodded, then turned back to the attacker. "You can track me? How?"

"Your blood is the Dark Lord's blood."

Harry rolled his eyes. "That's starting to get pretty inconvenient. I assume your instructions are to kill me? Anything else?"

"You are the first priority, then the other five, then the three newest." Harry raised his eyebrows and glanced at the others at the reference to Luna, Helen, and Sylvia. "We were also to dispatch anyone who got in our way, including the inhabitants of the Slytherin common room."

"Professor Snape, are you getting this?" asked Harry.

"Yes," came Snape's reply. "Aurors have begun to arrive; other professors and I are with them at the castle entrance."

"I'm sending Ron and Pansy to join you," he said, glancing up at Ron and Pansy, to whom he said, "I know you'd rather be with me, but I need to be mobile. I can only travel with one person, and that's going to be Neville." He knew the others would understand that he wanted Neville's dueling ability if for whatever reason the Imperius Charm wasn't effective.

"Acknowledged," said Snape. Fawkes returned from transporting the most recent pair of Hufflepuffs; Ron and Pansy took hold of his tail, and were gone. Harry turned his attention to the captured attacker.

"Voldemort must know about the Imperius Charm. Why did he send you anyway, knowing I could just do this?"

“The Dark Lord believes that there is no such thing as the Imperius Charm, and that you simply used the Imperius Curse and called it something else so you would not have to answer for having used one of the Unforgivable Curses.”

“The Dark Lord is an unbelievable moron,” muttered Harry, oblivious to the amazed looks that all the remaining students except for Hermione and Neville were wearing.

“We are all expert in resisting the Imperius Curse, which he thought would be more than sufficient,” the man went on. “In addition, I am wearing an artifact, a ring which shields one from all spells affecting the brain except Legilimency.”

“I don’t see any ring,” said Harry.

“It is invisible when worn,” the man explained.

“Give it to me,” instructed Harry. The man took something off a finger, and a simple gold band became visible. Harry took it and put it on, and it became invisible again. He sensed low-level Dark magic drawing nearer; he knew he might have to leave, but that his Imperius Charm hold on the man would disappear if he did. “If I wrap you up, will you be able to escape?”

“Now that I have given you my extra wands, no,” said the man.

Harry nodded. “I’d like to talk more, but the others are coming,” he said as he performed the spell that wrapped the man in ropes. He touched the man and Disapparated, appearing in the detection room at Auror headquarters. An Auror ran over to take the man from Harry. “Others will be on the way,” said Harry, who then Disapparated, now finding himself back in the History of Magic classroom. The evacuation was almost finished; the only people remaining were Hermione, Neville, and Dentus. “All the common rooms covered?” Harry asked Hermione.

“All except Hufflepuff,” she said. “I’ll go there.”

He nodded. “Take Archibald to the Slytherin common room. Ready, Neville?”

“Any time you are.”

Harry sensed that two attackers were very near the door now. He wasn't sure exactly where the other two were, but he knew they were on a lower level of the castle. He touched Neville's shoulder, and they were outside, on the roof of the castle. "I came here because I need a minute to concentrate, to get a more accurate idea of where they are."

"I'll help out by not disturbing you," joked Neville.

Harry smiled. "Thanks, I appreciate that." He closed his eyes and focused, and opened them a minute later. "The two that were almost outside the classroom are heading upwards, but they're nowhere near where I want to go, which is the important thing." He touched Neville, and they were outside the Room of Requirement. "Keep your eyes open, I'll do the wishing." He walked back and forth three times, concentrating, and the door opened. He walked in, Neville following.

Harry let out a low whistle; it had worked even better than he imagined. On a square portion of the floor about two yards long and two yards wide, there was a three-dimensional representation of the castle; the highest point of the castle was seven feet from the ground. Every aspect of the castle was clearly visible, yet transparent, so everything could be seen; the people, four inches tall, could be recognized by their features. Neville gaped. "Wow, you sure know how to wish," he marveled.

"Now, let's just make sure that... okay, there they are," said Harry, relieved that the attackers showed up on this map even though they didn't on the ones Hermione had made. Looking more closely, to his dread, he saw groups of people at both locations where there were two attackers nearby. Two attackers, on their way to Harry's current location, were about to pass the library; Harry felt he had to worry that they would decide to run in and kill the fifteen or so people the image told Harry were inside. The teachers and Aurors had split into two groups; one was not far from the library, but not close enough to get there in time.

The other two attackers were near a group of ten younger students, probably about ten seconds away from reaching them. Tentatively deciding that he

and Neville should go there first, his heart sank as he realized that they were the Slytherin second years. What are they doing? he thought, but of course he knew; he also knew that every second he delayed put someone in danger. His heart heavy, he touched Neville and Apparated them to the library, behind the attackers.

The attackers turned as they clearly heard the popping sounds of an Apparation, but Harry used the Imperius Charm before they could do anything. “Drop all wands and artifacts, as quickly as possible,” instructed Harry, and they busily started doing so.

“Everybody, get out here!” shouted Neville into the library. Surprised people started coming out as the attackers dropped the last of their wands.

“On the ground, face down, arms extended,” said Harry, and the attackers again did so. Neville wrapped one, as Harry did the other. Harry was about to instruct the people leaving the library to watch over the wrapped attackers, but he saw Snape, Flitwick, Ron, and a few Aurors at the end of the hall, approaching. “Over here!” he shouted, then touched Neville’s shoulder, and Disapparated.

They appeared in another hallway, behind the last two attackers, who had caught up to the second years. The second years were sprawled out on the ground as the result, Harry was sure, of an area-effect spell. He saw a Killing Curse shield disappearing around one of them, and a fireball sailing through the air towards them. Trusting Neville to deal with the fireball, Harry used the Imperius Charm on the attackers. As they turned to face him, Neville whisked the fireball away rapidly; it exploded near a staircase twenty feet away from the second years. Harry quickly put out the fire, then told the attackers to hand over their equipment. Neville collected it as Harry walked to the second years and started helping them up. Pulling Helen to her feet, he said, “You scared me. You were a few seconds away from getting killed.”

Looking both guilty and defiant, she said, “We were only trying to help you.”

“I know, and I appreciate it. But one of the first things I told you last year was never to walk into danger without knowing what you’re facing. Even with the Killing Curse shield, you’re a few years of my classes away from being able to deal with these kind of people. Even with ten of you and two of them, there are too many things they can do that you can’t stop.” Thinking there was something else they should know firsthand, Harry turned to one of the now-compliant attackers. “Who were your targets?” He got the same answer as from the other one, and the Slytherins exchanged amazed looks. Harry noticed that Helen and Sylvia looked more surprised than frightened.

“Why us?” asked Sylvia, puzzled. “Just because we can use the energy of love? Other people are going to learn it, too.”

“That’s the point,” explained Harry. “Voldemort wants to scare other people into not learning it, because it’s a threat to him.”

Harry saw satisfied, determined looks on a few faces. “Well, then, we’re just going to try twice as hard,” said David firmly. “And you know, Professor, it wasn’t only to help you that we did this. That was part of it, but... they killed a lot of Slytherins, and tried to kill us. We were angry, we wanted to find them.”

Harry slowly nodded. “I can understand that... but still, you shouldn’t have gone. Anyway, this was the last of them, and it’s safe now, so you should go back to your common room.”

“Um, we’d sort of rather not, Professor,” said Hedrick. “There’s all those bodies there...”

Harry hadn’t thought of that. “Okay, just go there for a minute, tell Professor Dentus that we got them all; then you can go wherever you want.” They thanked him and walked off.

He turned back to Neville and the attackers. “What they did was kind of stupid, wasn’t it,” commented Neville sympathetically.

“It really was,” agreed Harry.



“So, do you think it was more, or less, stupid than trying to get past a huge, aggressive three-headed dog?” asked Neville, allowing himself a smile after he finished speaking.

“Yes, I see your point,” said Harry reluctantly. “Let’s go find the others. I’ll call Ron and Pansy on the pendants, find out where they are.” They started walking, the attackers falling in behind them. Because of Harry’s spell, they were now harmless, but Harry didn’t forget that they had helped kill a dozen people a very short time ago.

A little over an hour later, Harry walked into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, where his friends were waiting for him. Ginny walked up to him and hugged him; it was his first time to see her since the attack. He conjured the carpet, and they sat.

“I guess you all know that I was just in a meeting with McGonagall, Snape, and Kingsley,” began Harry. “First, the bad news. The total dead is fourteen. Twelve Slytherins were killed very quickly.” Turning to Pansy, he added, “It would have been much more if not for you, Helen, and Sylvia; you saved a few dozen lives. The other two were Ravenclaws who were unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were a third year and a seventh year... the seventh year was Lisa Turpin.”

Ron, Neville, and Hermione winced, as had Harry when he’d been told. They quickly explained to Ginny and Pansy what had happened in the class. “It’s not your fault, Harry,” said Hermione gently.

“I know... just a little reminder any little thing you do can have consequences,” he said. “I know she was being rude, and deserved to be thrown out, and if I blame myself I have to blame Archibald more, which I won’t. But still...”

“We all assumed they got in through Slytherin somehow, but the strange thing is how,” continued Harry. “Something was left behind in the seventh year

Slytherin boys' dormitory by one of the ones who left last year. It must have been Crabbe or Goyle, since we would have found it hidden under a Memory Charm if it had been Malfoy or Nott. Hermione, remember that book you told us in the summer you'd read, when Ron made that joke about you going to Hogwarts in another dimension? You said that there was reputed to be a device called a Dimensional Door. Well, this was it."

The rest looked surprised, especially Hermione. "I wonder what else in that book was true..." she marveled. "Does it work the same way the book said?"

"They don't know, of course, but they think so. The attackers—it turns out they were assassins for hire—told us that part of the deal was that the time they would be sent couldn't be predicted, that they would have to be called on short notice. So, that fits in with what you said about the other end moving around all the time. It also means that the other end is somewhere out of the country, since the Aurors would have detected an Apparation from the assassins showing up suddenly, and they didn't."

"But they can find the other end now, right?" asked Hermione. "The assassins would tell you where it was."

"Voldemort thought of that," said Harry regretfully. "He escorted all of them, they had no idea where they were going, so they can't tell us where the fixed end is."

"Sounds like Voldemort didn't have a lot of confidence that they'd succeed," commented Ron.

"Just being careful, I guess," suggested Harry. "This also, of course, explains how the wasps got here, they just sent them through. It was just lucky for them that Blaise happened to not be in the dormitory at that time. And, it was very unlucky that Blaise happened to be in his dormitory this time. They killed him, of course, before he could yell or do anything."

The others looked sad or glanced down. "Poor guy," said Neville, with obvious sorrow. "Like I've said before, that was me if things didn't go my way. It's

hard to imagine how things could have not gone his way more than they did. Then, after six years, things start to look up for him, and then..." He sighed heavily. "His life was so messed up, and it wasn't even his fault. He was starting to come out of his shell, too. I had my first actual conversation with him last week, it was good progress, for him. It's just so..." Neville shook his head, and Hermione took his hand.

"It really stinks," agreed Harry. "I mean, at least if something happened to me, or to any of us... we've all had pretty good lives, especially this past year. But the best part of his life was ahead of him, and then boom, it's gone. It's so unfair." They sat in silence for a minute, each lost in thought.

Finally, he spoke again. "They ran out into the common room, and just started shooting off Killing Curses. Even though you," he said to Pansy, "and the second years got out there as soon as you heard the screams, they managed to kill eleven in that short time. I assume you know who they were, by now."

She nodded grimly. "All four of the other seventh year girls, three sixth year boys, including Thomas, three fifth year boys, and one fifth year girl. They were all older ones because the older ones tended to take the best spots on the sofas and nice chairs, and that area happens to be near the entrance to the seventh year boys' dormitory."

"So, now, you're the only seventh year Slytherin," said Ron sadly.

She nodded. "I wasn't that close to the other girls, as you know, but it was better than it was last year. They didn't look down on me anymore, they liked me okay, it was just that they knew that you were my 'group,' and they were their own group. I lived with them, of course, and did talk to them a certain amount. I'll miss them. It'll be strange being the only one in a whole dormitory."

"I've always wished you could move to mine," said Hermione, "but especially now."

She nodded her thanks. "They'd never allow it, of course, but I'd like that too."

“So, are we stuck with that Dimensional Door thing now?” asked Ron. “I assume there’s no way to get rid of it?”

“Not that they know of,” said Harry. “McGonagall’s going to have the Ministry research it, maybe they’ll get lucky and find something. But for now, yeah, we can’t do anything. They’ll do what countermeasures they can, try to seal off the whole dormitory. By the way, one thing I found out at the meeting... they knew what happened almost immediately, but of course, couldn’t react fast enough to save the Slytherins. You remember I told you that they were putting up a monitoring device in that dormitory because of what Blaise and that boy did. It was set with alarms to notify Snape and McGonagall if anyone else entered the dormitory or if magic was used. They were notified as soon as the assassins came in, but by the time they got to places where they could see the images, it was too late.”

“So, that’s how Snape knew so fast,” said Hermione. “Did you get a lecture for not going to Auror headquarters like Snape told you to do?”

Harry shrugged a little. “Kind of, but her heart wasn’t in it. I probably shouldn’t have done this, but I told her she shouldn’t give me orders she knows I can’t accept. I kind of didn’t want to say it, because it’s like insubordination, but I said it because it was true. I said I knew more people would die if I left than if I stayed, and I couldn’t live with sitting safe at Auror headquarters while other people were in the danger meant for me. I think she already knew that, though. I also pointed out that I had the Imperius Charm; she just gave me this look, and said, ‘And of course, if you did not have it, you would have gone straight to Auror headquarters.’ I didn’t say anything, because obviously, she was right.”

“Harry, Neville told us what happened after you and he went off alone,” said Hermione. “And by the way, I want to see in the Pensieve that thing you had the Room of Requirement create, it sounded amazing. But I want to ask, why did you go to the library before helping the second years? They could have been killed, they almost were.”

He nodded somberly. "I hated to do it, believe me. But I had to assume the assassins were going to go into the library, and... the people in the library were totally unaware, had no idea what was happening. The second years knew what they were doing, they did it deliberately. I felt like I had to save the people who didn't choose to be in danger sooner than the ones who did. I don't really know if that's right or not, but I had to make a decision immediately, and that was the one I made." He looked at Pansy, silently asking for her thoughts.

"I'm not going to second-guess you," she said. "If it had been me, I probably would have gone to the second years, just out of emotion, but you have a good point. It's very... principled, I guess. I know it wasn't easy."

"Seems like the kind of thing Dumbledore would have done, putting principle above his personal feelings," suggested Neville. "By the way, Pansy, and Ginny, you should really use the Pensieve to watch the lecture Harry gave on Dumbledore. It was really great, really interesting. I didn't know a lot of that stuff."

"It took him six or seven nights to tell me all of it," said Harry, "and a lot of it was also in the book he wrote me. Of course, there was a lot of stuff I left out. Mostly for the sake of time, but I left out one big detail on purpose. When it came to the part where he killed Grindelwald... he told me that just as the Killing Curse left his wand, he felt this blinding, awful pain in his head, worse than the worst pain he'd ever had. It lasted for just a second or two, then it was gone. He had no idea what caused it. At the time, he could only guess, but he changed his mind much later, after he realized that his magic was based on the energy of love. He thinks that anyone who uses the energy of love who tries to do a really Dark spell, like the Killing Curse or the Cruciatus Curse, will experience what he did."

"So, it was like his ability to use the energy of love was being ripped out, so to speak," said Hermione. "I think I know why you left that out."

Harry nodded. "It would have led to questions about me, whether that would happen to me if I ever tried to kill Voldemort. I'm willing to bet it would."

“Which means you can’t even try to kill Voldemort,” said Ron, concerned. “If you tried, and failed, you’d lose the ability to use the energy of love, and then you’d be in real trouble.”

“I’ve said all along I don’t think I’m going to beat him by killing him,” agreed Harry. “I just feel that really strongly. I wonder if the energy of love is causing me to have that feeling, influencing me to feel that killing is just out of the question. I mean, look how reluctant Albus was, how much it took for him to change his mind. And even then, he really agonized over it. He just had such overwhelming guilt at having let Grindelwald escape. He said he only realized much later that your decisions are probably going to be bad ones if they’re made out of guilt. His intuition was always that killing was wrong, no matter what. But, he said, that kind of thing is part of the lessons we all have to learn. That’s one of the reasons he was patient and understanding of people’s mistakes and bad choices; he said it’s part of the process.”

“He was always really wise,” mused Hermione. “I guess we just didn’t know exactly how... hard-earned his wisdom was.”

“Harry,” said Neville, “I’m sorry, it seems like I’m always the one asking you this, but...”

“How do I feel?” He paused, thinking. “Really sad, of course, but not like Hogsmeade, which I guess is why you asked. It seems like I should be.”

“Not that you should feel guilty if you don’t,” put in Neville quickly.

“I know. I’m not sure what it is. Maybe... I think a lot of what I felt over Hogsmeade had to do with the fact that I was putting people in danger by what I did, danger they didn’t choose. By now, though, everyone understands pretty well what’s happening, that there’s a risk just being around here, around where I am. And since everyone—that I know of, anyway—has supported what I’ve done, I feel as though we’re together in it, not that it’s just me and the rest of you. I don’t know if that makes any sense, but I guess it’s enough to take away enough of my feeling of personal responsibility so that I’m not crying my eyes out.”

“I’m glad you’re not,” said Ginny, reaching over to take his hand. “This wasn’t your fault, and Hogsmeade wasn’t either.”

“Do you think,” asked Neville, “that part of it has to do with the fact that you know now that death isn’t the last thing?”

“Good question, I don’t know. Maybe a little, but I still feel really bad for the friends and relatives, and they don’t get to know what I know. I wish they could, but I can’t be taking the Pensieve to people I don’t even know.”

“I also think,” suggested Hermione, “that people don’t talk to you through Albus unless it was someone you knew well, or someone close to someone you knew well. When Skeeter died, I wondered if she would talk to me through you and Albus, but she didn’t.” Harry wondered whether Hermione had been hoping to be forgiven, or told something to relieve the huge burden she carried at the time.

“I’d like to be able to talk to Blaise,” said Neville. “Just tell him...” Neville trailed off in astonishment as he looked straight ahead, over Harry’s shoulder. Harry turned and gaped as he saw Blaise walking toward them, apparently unmindful of the fact that he was walking through chairs. Harry could see through Blaise very easily. He turned to the others, exchanging looks of amazement.

“Hello,” said Blaise shyly. “Hi, Neville. You wanted to talk to me?”

Very understandably, Harry thought, Neville stammered and stumbled for a few seconds before getting any words out. “Blaise? How... um...” Neville glanced at Hermione, as if wanting her help, then back at Blaise, who looked surprised to see Neville so discomfited. “How are you doing?” said Neville lamely, obviously unable to think of anything else to say.

Blaise looked thoughtful. “I feel kind of strange, for some reason. I mean, I was taking a nap, and when I woke up, everything looked different somehow. It just feels strange. Did something happen around here, or is it just me?”

Again, Harry traded looks of shock with the others. Oh, my God, he doesn’t realize he’s dead, thought Harry. How are we going to tell him? How do you

tell someone something like that? ‘Oh, by the way, you’re dead?’ He felt very much at a loss.

Fortunately for him, Hermione spoke. “Blaise, what’s, um, what’s the last thing you remember before you walked in here?”

“That’s the funny thing, I’m not sure,” he said; Harry noticed that Blaise wasn’t stammering like he usually did, and wondered whether it was because Blaise had been becoming more socially adept, or because he was dead. “I don’t even remember waking up and getting out of bed. I felt like I was dreaming, and then Neville wanted to talk to me, and here I am. I’m not even sure how I got here. What’s going on?”

The six looked at each other again; clearly, nobody wanted to be the one to tell him. Harry felt he should do it, since only he and Neville had really ever talked to Blaise. He decided to ease into it. “There was... an attack on the school. A group of five assassins, they were looking for me.”

“Oh,” said Blaise. “But you’re okay, right?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” Harry replied, feeling that it was very strange that he should have to say that to a dead person. “But it was pretty bad. Fourteen people were killed.”

“Oh, no,” said Blaise. “Who?”

“Two Ravenclaws, the rest were older Slytherins. Four fifth years, three sixth years... and all the seventh years except Pansy.”

“You mean, except me and Pansy.”

Harry sighed, and stood to face Blaise. “I’m sorry, Blaise. You were sleeping, and it happened really fast. They got you with a Killing Curse before you could wake up.” He found he felt sadder about Blaise’s death than he had since he’d heard about it.

“But, I’m not... dead,” protested Blaise. “I’m standing right here.”



“Take my hand,” said Harry solemnly, offering an outstretched hand. Looking at Harry quizzically, Blaise hesitantly did so, and his hand went through Harry’s.

Looking shocked, Blaise took a step back. “Maybe you’re the ones who are dead. Maybe the assassins got all of you, and you don’t realize it.”

“I’m sorry, Blaise, but I haven’t been sleeping, none of us have. If I’d been killed, I would have remembered how it happened. You don’t remember it because you were sleeping. Hermione, could you show us the map?”

She took out the map, activated it, and stood. Holding it up so Blaise could see it, she pointed at their current location. “It shows just the six of us here,” she said sorrowfully. “Changes, students only, two hours,” she said to the map. It became blank except for eleven dots and names in the Slytherin common room, the two Ravenclaws found dead in the halls, and Blaise in his dormitory. “This shows students who were here two hours ago but aren’t anymore,” she went on, to Blaise. “The map knows you’re not here.”

Blaise stared, uncomprehending, and said nothing for a minute. Finally, he said, “I don’t feel dead. I mean, something feels off, but...” He walked over to a chair, tried to grab it, and his hand passed through it. After another pause, he said, “Wow, I guess I am. Strange, this isn’t what I thought it would feel like. I mean, I feel almost like I usually do.” Another pause, then, “So, does this mean I’m a ghost?”

Harry slowly nodded. “I think so.”

“Why, though?” wondered Blaise. “Most people don’t become ghosts, they just... go wherever people go. Why me?”

Harry tried not to let his sorrow show in his face or voice. “I’m not sure. Professor Dumbledore told me that ghosts usually stay because they feel they have something to do, something that isn’t finished. You know, it might be a good idea for you to talk to him. He could probably help you understand what’s going on.”

“But he died a while ago... is he a ghost too?”

“No, he isn’t, but he... didn’t move on yet,” Harry said, trying to keep the explanation as simple as possible. “You can talk to him. All you have to do is think about him, concentrate on wanting to talk to him and you’ll be able to.”

Blaise seemed surprised, and asked, “Can I talk to my grandmother that way?”

Harry felt even sadder, imagining that Blaise had been especially close to his grandmother, and she had perhaps died around when Blaise started at Hogwarts. “No, I’m afraid not. Just Professor Dumbledore, he’s kind of a special case; the circumstances of his death were kind of... unusual. But you really should talk to him, I’m sure he could answer your questions and help you.”

“Okay... well, I should go, think about this a little.” He started to turn around, then turned back. “Oh, Neville, I remember, I came here because you wanted to talk to me. What did you want to say?”

Looking extremely uncomfortable, Neville looked down, then up again. “I, uh, just wanted to say that your magic was doing much better, and...” Neville shrugged helplessly, then continued, “And, I wished you hadn’t died.”

“Thanks,” said Blaise, looking slightly confused. “I think I’ll go back to my dormitory, see what’s going on there. See you later.” He turned and left, walking through a wall rather than the door. Harry felt his chest tighten as he sat back down on the carpet, and exchanged a look with Neville. Then he turned to Ginny; she saw the expression on his face, and reached over to hold him. He put his head on her shoulder and started sobbing.