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CHAPTER 16

VOLDEMORT'S HAND

The next day being Saturday, Harry had his usual training with the Aurors, though it was cut short by an hour to allow Harry and Neville to return to Hogwarts for the memorial service for those who had died. Afterwards, they returned to eat with the Aurors, then have the energy-of-love session. Harry gave them an abridged account of what he'd told the History of Magic class, with special emphasis on the parts having to do with the energy of love; he wanted to emphasize that Dumbledore had felt that there were very negative consequences to feelings of anger, and using the Killing Curse.

Harry spent most of his time on Sunday finishing up his Ring of Reduction. There was supposed to have been a Quidditch practice, but McGonagall had called off all practices for a week, out of respect for Thomas, and the desire not to choose a new Slytherin Seeker so soon after his death. Continuing work on his Ring, Harry wasn't interrupted until three-thirty, when he was called by Snape for a session.

Snape viewed recent memories; enough of interest had happened since the previous session that that took up the time necessary. Snape finished by viewing Harry's presentation to the seventh years on Dumbledore. Putting down his wand, Snape commented, "Ironically, I could have given a much more detailed and accurate lecture, though of course without the emotional content of yours. From my experience doing this with the headmaster, I am intimately familiar with the events of which you spoke."

Harry could well imagine that. "But you probably found it annoying, all that agonizing he did over something that you would consider obvious."

“I would not say ‘annoying,’ but rather, something very far outside my experience. It was useful as a way to understand how he thought, and I was not unmindful of the fact that had he not been the person he was, he would not have been able to assist me as he did. I only became impatient when what he did had an effect in the here and now, in the struggle against the Dark Lord.”

It suddenly occurred to Harry that Snape had probably seen Voldemort the day before, when Harry had been with the Aurors. “Speaking of which, how is the ol’ Dark Lord, anyway?” he asked flippantly.

Snape gave Harry a very disapproving look, as though he were tempting fate. “Before you used his name to mock him; now you use the phrase ‘the Dark Lord’ to do so. As you obviously surmise, he is most displeased, though his expectations of the success of this operation were not high.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “His opinion of me must be going up, if he sends five supposedly world-class assassins after me and doesn’t expect them to do the job.”

“They were not the best in the world,” clarified Snape. “The very best would not take the assignment, because of the uncertainty of the timing, the fact that Hogwarts is a secure environment which does not allow for Disapparation, and your reputation for surviving. A Death Eater told me that one potential assassin, when approached, said, ‘If the Dark Lord wants Potter dead so badly, he should do it himself.’”

Harry couldn’t keep a grin off his face. “Bet he loved that.”

Snape nodded. “It is precisely the sort of attitude that he wants to avoid. In your lecture to the class, you were quite perceptive in noting that this is a weakness of the Dark Lord’s, the fear and awe in which he insists on being held. It interferes with his goal of power, with operational priorities. Speaking of which, I thought I would inform you that the headmistress and I agreed that I would inform the Dark Lord of your reference to him as an...” Snape paused, obviously uncomfortable with even quoting something so insulting to Voldemort, “... ‘unbelievable moron.’”

It has spread around the school to such an extent that it will undoubtedly spread outside, and he would find out eventually. Since I obviously would have heard it, it was better that I tell him.”

Harry had heard that his comment was being widely quoted, and that it was starting to be used by students with each other if one said something another thought was stupid. “Is that the kind of thing he really wants to know?” Harry wondered, surprised.

“He wants to know of any disrespect to him, so he can take punitive action if he chooses to,” said Snape. “He has not given specific instructions that disrespect from you is not to be quoted. His reaction to what you said was... understated, but clear.”

Harry smiled a little, imagining it; then he had another thought. “Is Voldemort a ‘shoot-the-messenger’ type?”

“I am not familiar with the reference, no doubt Muggle, but I gather the meaning. Fortunately, no, that is not one of his weaknesses. Your concern, however, is most touching,” said Snape dryly.

Harry chuckled. “Thanks, I’m glad you appreciate it. So, does he believe that there’s such a thing as the energy of love now?” asked Harry.

Snape shook his head. “He accepts that you have found a new type of magic; the evidence supporting that is overwhelming. He does not accept that it is based in love, even given your success in teaching your friends and three others. I have told him of your methods of teaching it; naturally, he sneers at it.” I hope he keeps sneering, thought Harry. “He speculates that the true source of the power is something which is transmitted accidentally along with the teaching.”

“Boy, talk about a blind spot,” said Harry in wonder.

“Keep in mind, though, that many in the Ministry did not believe it at first, either,” pointed out Snape, “and they were not nearly as invested in disbelieving it as the Dark Lord. I myself might not have believed it were it not for my experience

with the headmaster; it is only because he found love such a source of strength that he could be the person he was, as you explained to Professor Dentus's class.

"There is one unfortunate development which has arisen in the wake of this event," continued Snape. "You recall that the Dark Lord instructed me to find a way to kill you, and only the headmistress's actions prevented him from making it a matter of urgency. Now, he has made it such a matter, deciding that your elimination is a higher priority than the possibility of my becoming headmaster."

"That's not good," said Harry solemnly. Deadpan, he added, "I guess you'll have to kill me, then."

Snape rolled his eyes. "It is a serious matter, your macabre humor notwithstanding." At Harry's blank look, he sighed. "Perhaps Professor Smith has a point when he says there should be some non-magical instruction at Hogwarts. Your vocabulary is sadly deficient."

"I'll ask Hermione the next time I see her," he joked. "But John'll be happy to hear that you said that. Anyway, obviously I know it's serious. Is there a deadline?"

"He is at work acquiring an artifact, one that he is sure will do the job; he said he will have it for me before winter vacation ends. So, one could say that the deadline is roughly mid-January. After that, if I have not made an attempt, he will want to know why. I do not yet know the nature of the artifact, so I cannot know if a plausible excuse to avoid its use exists."

"But probably, you'll have to leave Hogwarts, right?" asked Harry.

Snape nodded. "Unfortunately, yes, it likely cannot be avoided. Exactly what will be done, again, cannot be known until we know more about the artifact. But the most likely scenario involves my 'capture' and imprisonment."

"What if Professor McGonagall—" began Harry, but Snape cut him off.

"No, it will do no good, as I have already explained to her. The Dark Lord is determined; even if she were to die tomorrow, he would not change his plans."

“Too bad we can’t fake my death,” mused Harry. “Well, this is pretty bad. Maybe we’ll get lucky, and something will happen in the meantime to change the situation.”

“It is highly doubtful,” said Snape in an admonishing tone, as if it was irresponsible of Harry to get his hopes up. “In addition to the more important problems the situation poses, the headmistress must soon search for a new Potions master.”

“I forgot about that,” said Harry. “She can’t start looking yet, of course. I guess we can’t do much until after vacation. So, is there anything else you think I should know?”

Snape nodded, and reached for a small box on a shelf above his desk; he put it on the desk nearest Harry. “These are Mr. Zabini’s personal effects, which will be sent back to his relatives. There are a few things I thought would interest you, in the folder on the top.”

Puzzled, Harry took the folder and opened it. To his surprise, on the top was a Harry Potter Chocolate Frog card. Below that were articles obviously clipped from the Prophet; the one on the top was from April of that year, detailing his escape from the Chamber and his discovery of the Killing Curse shield. Looking through the articles, he saw that all featured him prominently, and were in chronological order. He was fairly sure that they were all of the articles the Prophet had written about him; the one written by Skeeter was there as well. Harry looked up at Snape, who was wearing a satisfied smirk. With sudden discomfort, he knew what Snape thought; as for himself, he wasn’t sure what to think.

“I don’t think this means what you obviously think it means,” said Harry defensively. “Lots of people have my Chocolate Frog card. A couple dozen students asked me to autograph ones they’d gotten over the summer.”

“Odd that he did not ask,” commented Snape. “What is also odd is that in his belongings there were no other Chocolate Frog cards, only yours. I am given to

understand that the chances of getting any particular card in one package are less than one in five hundred.”

Harry wondered how Snape knew that. “It was one in twenty when they came out,” he pointed out.

“He would not have purchased it then,” said Snape. “You will note that the articles date from Easter, after the last of the others had... departed. While they were there, he no doubt felt that his belongings could be searched at any time by the others, and would not want to have risked them finding such a thing.”

Harry thought that Blaise could have bought cards on vacation in January, left them at home, and brought this one in when the term started in September, but then the question became, why only Harry’s card. He found himself becoming annoyed with Snape. “It could have been that he just admired me. After all, it was in trying to kill me that the four people who made his life miserable ended up leaving Hogwarts, it’s no surprise that he should support me.”

“It is not impossible,” agreed Snape, still wearing the smirk.

Harry sighed, getting more and more annoyed. “And even if it does mean what you think it means, I don’t care.”

Snape’s smirk became even more pronounced. “You mean, you wish you did not care. You clearly do. As Professor Dentus once pointed out to you, your feelings show very clearly on your face.”

Harry was not happy to have a memory Snape got from their sessions used against him in that way. “Do you really want to be having Schadenfreude at my expense? I thought we both knew that wasn’t helpful.”

Now Snape’s smirk vanished, and he became serious. “I am trying to make a point. This causes you great discomfort, for a reason. If there were nothing wrong with this, we would not feel such revulsion at the prospect. Tolerance of this sort of thing only leads to suffering.”

Only if both parties aren’t willing, Harry thought, but didn’t say. He realized he had to be careful around Snape about the topic, as it had caused Snape to violate

the understanding they had once already, and he didn't feel like getting into a fight with Snape, especially over this topic. Snape was being deliberately provocative, but Harry knew he didn't have to respond to the provocation, and that it was better that he didn't. "I think I should probably go," he said, standing. He waited a second for Snape to object if he wanted to, but Snape said nothing, so Harry walked to the door and left. Please, he thought as he walked away, if any boys at Hogwarts touch each other again, please let me not hear about it.

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Phoenixes on their shoulders, Harry and Hermione walked out of the staff room the next afternoon, heading to the Charms classroom. "Not much conversation in there today, was there," she remarked.

"Sometimes there isn't," he replied. "I guess people are still pretty... whatever, over what happened on Friday. I still can't believe McGonagall got those owls." McGonagall had told the staff that she had received a few dozen owls over the weekend criticizing her for what had happened. "I mean, it wasn't like she opened the gates and let them in."

"Yes, but people don't know how it happened," pointed out Hermione. "It was a hard decision Professor McGonagall had to make. Parents, both of those who died and those who didn't, deserve to know how it happened. But operational security has to come first, and it's better if Voldemort doesn't know that we know how it happened. So Professor McGonagall gets stuck between her responsibilities as headmistress and as a leader of the Order."

"Ironically, if they knew what happened, they would blame Albus," said Harry. "It was on his watch that the Dimensional Door was put there, and it probably wouldn't have happened if he had routinely searched all of the sons of Death Eaters whenever they re-entered Hogwarts, like most parents would now have preferred he had."

“McGonagall wouldn’t have searched them either,” said Hermione.

“I’m not so sure,” responded Harry. “She’s done a few things that Albus wouldn’t have done. I know she wouldn’t like it, but she’s not an absolutist, like he was. If she thought the need was dire enough, she might have done it. Yes, she defended what he did last year, but then, so did we.”

“Maybe you’re right,” she conceded. “By the way, you just used his name in the past tense.”

Again, he hadn’t noticed. “I think I do when I’m thinking of him as doing things in the physical world, as opposed to how he thinks and feels. He can’t do things in the physical world, or won’t, but he’s still around.”

They reached the classroom, and took their usual seats. “So, this is everybody?” Harry asked Pansy, who was sitting next to him.

She nodded sadly. “This is the whole class, nine people. It feels strange.”

“Not as strange as sleeping alone in your dormitory,” suggested Ron, turning in his seat in front of Pansy.

“That’s true,” she agreed. “By the way, this is also strange, but... last night, about a half an hour before I went to bed, Blaise showed up in my dormitory.”

Harry could see that the others were as surprised as he was. “What was he doing there?” asked Ron.

“He was kind of in a corner, like he was trying not to disturb me,” said Pansy, clearly not bothered. “When I saw him, I called to him, and I talked to him a little. He apologized for going in there, he said he’d never seen a girls’ dormitory before, and wondered what it looked like. I said it looked pretty much like the boys’ dormitories.”

“I just hope he doesn’t start wondering what the girls’ shower looks like,” said Hermione, looking a little nervous.

“He didn’t stay long, but I did take the opportunity to do something I’d been meaning to do,” continued Pansy. “I apologized to him for what I’d done to him before. I meant to do it while he was alive, I just never found the right time.

But at least I got to do it. When he died, one of the things I was thinking was that I wished I had.”

“How did he respond?” asked Neville.

“About like you’d expect,” she said. “Kind of nervous, but he seemed to appreciate it. He left soon after that, fortunately; I didn’t want to have to ask him to leave. Now I kind of wonder what his Ring was going to be. Probably he hadn’t finished it; I don’t think anyone had by last Friday. Well, except you, of course,” she grinned, glancing at Hermione.

“I kept changing it a little up until yesterday, but yes, I was pretty much finished last week,” admitted Hermione. “I wanted to get it out of the way, to study for the exams in the other classes. And I had to make exams for the first and second years, that was interesting, but—” She cut herself off as Flitwick entered the room and walked up the steps leading to his platform behind the podium.

Flitwick led them in a moment of silence in memory of the five Slytherins in the class who had died on Friday, then announced that he would be inspecting the students’ completed Rings. “Remember, if I cannot enter it, points will be taken off. It should be set so that anyone can enter. After I have inspected it, you should change the charm to only allow yourself or close relatives entry unescorted.” With a small grin, he added, “I will begin with those of my fellow professors. Hermione, yours first, please.” Hermione walked up to the front of the class as Flitwick walked down the steps to the floor; she bent over and handed him her Ring.

As she walked back to the others, Neville said, “Okay, we have to decide who goes with Harry to see his, since we’re all pretty keen to.”

“Especially since by making it two-by-two instead of one-by-one he did more work on it than he had to, which I think is a homework first for him,” teased Hermione. “Let’s flip a Galleon for it.” Amused, Harry watched as Neville won the flip between he and Hermione, and Pansy the one with Ron. Pansy won the final flip, and with a smile, walked over to Harry and took his hand after he placed his

Ring on the floor. He took a small handful of Floo powder, threw it down, and stepped on the Ring, saying, "Harry Potter!"

They were inside, and looking out at a vast expanse consisting of green grass and clear blue sky. Nothing else was visible except the wall near them, and two brooms floating in midair a few feet from the door. "Wow," marveled Pansy. "I forgot that you could make it bigger than the usual dimensions. How big is it?"

"I ended up deciding on three hundred meters in each dimension," he said. Letting go of her hand, he took one of the brooms and handed it to her. "You know the dimensions have to be the same, it has to be a perfect cube."

"I assume that's a Hover Charm keeping the brooms there," she said.

"Yes," he said, taking the second one. "There's also a Summoning Charm in the same spot, so when we finish and go to the next door, they'll come back here."

"Good idea." She looked at the broom she'd been handed. "Is this your Firebolt?" she asked, very surprised.

He nodded. "I was planning to buy a couple of cheap brooms to keep in here permanently, but I hadn't gotten around to it yet, so I'm using mine and Ginny's for now. I assume you've guessed the purpose of this room?"

"To practice flying," she answered, "that's why you made it so big. Ron's going to love this, he'll love the idea of practicing even if it's raining outside." She and Harry mounted the brooms, and they kicked off and flew toward the other side of the room. "I would fly around with you for a while," she said, "but I guess I have to remember we're in a class, so we shouldn't take any more time than we have to."

"Yeah, I was thinking of Ron when I had this idea," he said. "I wanted to do a few more details, like maybe some clouds, but I was kind of pressed for time as it was. I was thinking that maybe during vacation, I would do some copies of this, one-room Rings just for this purpose. I could work on little things like that, maybe give one to each House so people could practice flying anytime they wanted."

Pansy chuckled. “You’re funny when you’re naive. McGonagall would never allow these to be in the common rooms. You may not have noticed, but these could be used for purposes other than flying, and since only two people can enter at once, they couldn’t be supervised.”

“You’re right, I hadn’t thought of that,” he admitted. “Maybe I could find a way to make it so that wouldn’t be a problem. I really thought it would be great for flying practice.” They slowed down as they approached the door to the second room. “Do you think these are ever made with that purpose in mind?”

“Maybe that’s a part of the book that Hermione didn’t get to before she stopped reading,” joked Pansy as they dismounted their brooms. “Anyway, this room was a really good idea. Very practical.”

They let their brooms fall to the floor as they stood in front of the door to the next room; the brooms immediately zoomed away to their destination near the other door. “After you,” he said as he gestured for her to go ahead.

She touched the door, and it opened. They stepped inside, and their environment was suddenly very different. There was still grass under their feet, but instead of a clear blue sky, there was a sunset in the distance, or what looked like the distance. And instead of total quiet, as there had been in the first room, there was phoenix song. “Oh, Harry, it’s beautiful,” gushed Pansy. “Is that... oh, my, is that both of them I’m hearing?”

“Yes, it was really good of them. I kind of hesitated to ask, because it seemed like a frivolous reason. But at the same time, this was important to me, and of course Fawkes and Flora both knew that. They sang together for about fifteen minutes; I set it so it repeats after it’s done. The recording isn’t quite the same as it is in the real world, but it’s still pretty good.”

“It’s great,” she assured him. “And now I’m definitely starting to think about other purposes for this room; I’ll be wanting to come back here with Ron sometime.”

Harry smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. Of course, Flitwick will get these when we're done, but there may be a way around that. I made two copies of this, one as a backup just in case. Maybe I can do a little touch-up work on the backup, change a few things."

"Maybe sand instead of grass," she suggested. "But this is really nice... I guess we should move on to the third room, though, unfortunately. I could stay here for hours."

He was very pleased with her reaction. "It's not really my doing, though; most people don't have access to phoenix song."

"That's because most people don't get chosen. Now, stop being modest and we can move on." He feigned meek acquiescence, and they walked to the center of the room, then turned left, then walked straight again until they were in front of the door to the third room. This time he opened it, and it was dark, except for a spotlight in the center of the room. They walked straight ahead, and stood in the light together. The light suddenly moved off them, to a spot two meters in front of them. An image flickered into existence; it was Harry. As the real Harry watched, he found it odd to be looking at himself. The image spoke.

"This message is for my children, I should say, my future children, since obviously I don't have any right now. I'm seventeen, the same age I assume you'll be when you see this. It's strange; as I speak, my future is very uncertain, but I have to speak as though Voldemort is defeated, since if he's not, there won't be any children to see this message. So, for right now, I have to assume that's what happened.

"I wanted to leave this message because... I don't know, I thought maybe you'd like to see what I was like when I was the age you are now. I would have liked to see my father like this. Of course, it would be different, since I never knew him, but with any luck I'll still be around by the time you see this. Still, since I know that any children I have who go to Hogwarts will see this, it seemed like a good use of a room.

“As I record this, it’s the middle of December of my seventh year at Hogwarts. Voldemort keeps making attempts on my life, I think there’ve been... eight so far, it’s hard to keep track. The last one was a few days ago. The hardest thing about these is that they put my friends in danger, and people get killed. This time, fourteen people got killed. Everyone’s told me dozens of times that it’s not my fault, that I’m doing what I should be doing in fighting Voldemort. I know it’s true, but what you know doesn’t make what you feel much different. I’ve been through so much already, sometimes I feel like I’m a lot older than I am.

“My friends get me through it, though. Of course I mean Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Pansy, and Neville. Whatever I’ve done, I could never have done without them, I know that. I couldn’t have even discovered the energy of love, because I wouldn’t have had anyone to love. I hope, I pray, that they’re all still around by the time you see this. I really want them to be a part of your lives.” Pansy smiled at Harry and took his hand as they watched. “And I wish you could have known Professor Dumbledore. He was so amazing when he was alive, and he still is now; it’s a great comfort to have him to talk to every night while I sleep. He may have died, but he hasn’t stopped looking after me. And obviously, I need all the help I can get right now.

“I’ll probably have a lot of stories to tell by the time you see this, and maybe I’ll have already told you a lot of them. It may seem like an exciting time, as someone said to me recently, but I can’t wait for it to be over. That’s because the one thing that comes along with this whole experience is death. From Albus, I know that we continue to exist after we die, but we miss and mourn the people who died, and I’ve just had enough of it. I want so much to go for even a whole year and have no one I know die of anything but natural causes. It doesn’t seem like so much to ask for.

“Well, that’s what my life is like right now. Pansy once said it was like someone turned the volume of my life all the way up, and it does feel like that. The good things are really good, and the bad things are really bad. I probably couldn’t

deal with it if not for what Albus taught me, and the others' help. I imagine that when you watch this, my life will be very routine. If so, the next time you talk to me, remind me of what I said here, and to appreciate it. Maybe I'll just say, 'I do, believe me.' It just seems like a good thing to keep in mind.

"I'll stop here. I just want to say, I may not know you yet, but I know that I'll love you. And I hope you'll like working on your Ring; I know I did. It kind of makes you think about what's important to you. In these four rooms... there's flying, which has always made me happy even when not much else did. There's Fawkes, in the second room, someone else without whose help I wouldn't be here. In this room, there's you, who I know will be an extremely important part of my life one day. And in the fourth room... well, it's kind of self-explanatory. Take care of yourself, and everyone around you. I love you." The image disappeared.

Eyes brimming with tears, Pansy turned to face him. "You're going to be such a good father," she said, squeezing his hand for emphasis. Harry smiled, remembering that Ginny had said exactly the same thing when he had shown her the completed Ring the night before. They walked ahead, to the entrance to the fourth room. Pansy put her hand to the door, and it opened.

They walked in to see a completely empty room; all that could be seen was a lit area five feet in front of them. They walked forward and stood in it, and the room suddenly came to life. They were in the shack on the island to which Vernon had taken Harry, Dudley, and Petunia when Harry started receiving the letters inviting him to attend Hogwarts. Hagrid was standing near a very small Harry, just eleven years old. "Yer a wizard, Harry," he said. Harry glanced over to see Pansy smiling at the astonished look on the young Harry's face.

The scene shifted; not instantaneously, but the old scene faded out and the new one faded in quickly. Harry was on the Hogwarts Express, meeting Ron for the first time. Then came his first conversation with Dumbledore, in the room with the Mirror of Erised. There were memories, usually about ten to fifteen seconds each, of important events of his third and fourth years, involving Lupin, Sirius, Cedric,

and Voldemort's rebirth, ending with Dumbledore's speech about doing what was difficult and right rather than what was easy and wrong. The next two minutes were memories of events of the past year and a half, focusing on the Aurors, the other Hogwarts professors, and the Slytherin second years.

The next thing they saw was Harry coming out of Gryffindor Tower and finding Pansy waiting outside. "Oh, Harry, I'm glad it's you. I want to talk to you. I want to help you." The real Pansy glanced at Harry in surprise as the scene shifted again, to a memory from a few days later, of Pansy insisting on helping Harry undercover despite Harry's objections and concerns. They then saw themselves in Dumbledore's office, him thanking her for saving his life after the Goyle attempt. The scene dissolved to Harry wishing the unconscious Pansy a fast recovery after Malfoy's attack, most of his speech in the Great Hall about what she had done, then finally to the applause she received the next day, after recovering from her injuries. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she put an arm around Harry and leaned her head against his shoulder. "I want them to know what you did," he said quietly. "What all of you did, what you've done for me."

The next group of scenes involved Neville: his confronting Harry, Ron, and Hermione as they set out to retrieve the Sorcerer's Stone, and his ten points that won them the House Cup; his attempt to help Harry at the Department of Mysteries; his dueling victory over Malfoy, his and Harry's training with the Aurors, and what he said to Harry after the attack in Dentus's fireplace.

There followed similar scenes involving Ginny, Hermione, then Ron, taking a minute to a minute and a half for each person. Finally, there were scenes featuring Dumbledore, including his duel with Voldemort, his performing Harry and Ginny's Joining, and his final goodbye to Harry before the June confrontation with Voldemort. From there, the scene changed to Harry's conversation with McGonagall at the staff social event about how Dumbledore would be remembered. That scene faded to a still image of Dumbledore as he appeared in the phoenix place; he had included it because while he wasn't supposed to show

scenes from that place, the still image alone didn't give evidence of where it had come from. The image remained for five seconds, then faded, and the room was empty again. Harry and Pansy silently walked forward and opened the last door, stepped through, and were suddenly in the class again.

Ron, Hermione, and Neville looked at Pansy for her reaction. Smiling, Hermione produced a packet of tissues and proffered it to Pansy. Pansy took only one tissue, saying, "You'll need them later." Hermione assured her that she had more.

Flitwick came by, saying, "That took longer than I would have thought. Well, I'll be next, then." Harry occupied himself by looking at Neville's Ring, followed by Ron's, then Pansy's. Soon after he exited that one, he saw Flitwick appear, just having finished viewing Harry's. He smiled at Harry and said, "It's quite... memorable. How will you be locking it?"

"Actually, I wanted to have you test that," said Harry. He waved his wand at his Ring, then said, "Okay, it's in place. Would you do me a favor, Professor: try to enter, but when you do, also point your wand at it and do the 'Blue' spell silently." Raising his eyebrows, Flitwick did so, and was unable to enter. "Okay, that's what I thought would happen," said Harry. "Now, Hermione and Neville, I want you to try. Do the same thing that he did. If you get in, just go ahead and view it." They did, and both successfully entered the Ring.

Flitwick nodded, impressed. "The measuring spell," he surmised.

"Yes," confirmed Harry. "So, you can get in by being a close relative of mine, or by being able to use the energy of love. Well, or by getting 100 without using the energy of love, but that's really rare. Also, if two people go, both of them have to be able to use it. Anyway, that's going to be its final lock. At least for this year, anyone who wants to try to enter it can do so."

"I imagine people may try to do it, if only to see whether they've reached 100," said Flitwick, who then moved on, inspecting Ron's next. Harry chatted with

Ron and Pansy; Ron tried to get Pansy to tell him what was in Harry's Ring, but she refused.

"You're going to have to find out for yourself," she admonished him. "But I'll get an extra tissue packet from Hermione, you might need it."

"Somehow I think I'll hold up okay," said Ron humorously.

They chatted for the next ten minutes, then suddenly Neville and Hermione appeared. Neville looked as though he had just been crying, and Hermione still was. Seeing Harry, she smiled, and sent him her feelings through Flora and Fawkes.

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Four days later, Harry and Hermione took their usual seats in the staff room after eating lunch. "No, it's hardly unexpected," said Dentus, obviously continuing a conversation that was in progress before they came in. "I'm almost surprised that this didn't happen until now, really." Looking over at Harry, he explained. "In the wake of last Friday's attack, Professor McGonagall has come under increasing pressure from parents regarding Hogwarts' security."

"I received a scroll this morning," continued McGonagall, "signed by fifty-nine parents, asking for a meeting as soon as possible. They want me to respond to their concerns about security. The letter hints that they may pull their children from Hogwarts if they are not satisfied with my answers."

"Damn," muttered Harry, frustrated. "Don't they know that their children aren't especially safe anywhere, these days?"

"They do," agreed Dentus, "but unfortunately, it can't be denied that Hogwarts is a particular target..." He trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

"Because of me," Harry finished for him. He looked down, thinking, then looked at McGonagall. "Are you going to meet with them?"

"I believe I have little choice," she said, resigned. "Perhaps not all the parents who signed this would remove their children, but it is likely that some

would. In addition, the fact is that they do deserve some kind of answer. Five percent of all Hogwarts students were killed last week; it is not as though their concerns are unreasonable.”

“Yes, but there’s nothing that you’ve done that you shouldn’t have, or that you shouldn’t have done that you did,” Harry pointed out. She shrugged lightly in response, conveying that as true as that was, it was also irrelevant. Harry could understand that; he wondered how he would feel if he were a parent. “Okay, well, I should be at this meeting, too. After all, it’s because of me that this is happening.”

“The school allowed you to start your crusade,” replied McGonagall. “As Professor Dumbledore was fond of pointing out, the headmistress is responsible for everything that happens at Hogwarts, whether it is in her power to control or not. We could have stopped you from doing what you have done. Not that we should have, but the concerns of the parents have to be addressed, and you do not bear ultimate responsibility for what has happened.”

“Yes, but if I may,” suggested Dentus, “it would be, in any case, an excellent idea for Harry to be there. Not to absolve you of responsibility, of course, but to remind parents of the greater struggle we face. Also, to remind them that Harry can provide a certain amount of security—”

“I don’t want him providing security!” snapped McGonagall. “I want him being secure!” There was silence as a few teachers looked at McGonagall, surprised. Calming down, she glanced at Dentus in apology; he nodded. “It’s just that, as you know, I’ve also been criticized for attempting to send Harry to Auror headquarters as soon as we found out. I do recognize that were it not for his disregarding my instructions, more people almost certainly would have died. He must be protected, at all costs. But how do you explain to a parent that their child may be one of the costs?”

“Professor,” said Harry, very serious, “I do understand. But I did what I did because it was what I could live with. You know how I am about this; I’m going to do the same thing if anything like this happens again. Since that’s the case anyway,

we might as well tell the parents that. It may be difficult for you to say that, because you want me protected at all costs. But it wouldn't be difficult for me to say. I really should be there."

"There is another benefit of him being there," added Dentus to McGonagall. "To put it rather bluntly, his presence may shame some of the parents into a less aggressive posture."

"Is that really going to work anymore?" wondered Harry. "I mean, parents are going to say, he's got the shields and the Imperius Charm, and he's really strong, so he's not in that much danger, but my child has none of that, and is very vulnerable."

Dentus shook his head. "A few might, but most aren't going to think that way. Nobody forgets that when you started defying Voldemort, you had none of those things. Nobody forgets what you withstood, to do it. You're still a symbol; your presence would remind parents that we are in a fight, and that we have to fight and not put our heads down. I understand how they feel, but if they start pulling their children, it'll be an encouragement to Voldemort."

"It's a lot to ask of anyone, though, to leave their children in danger as a point of principle," said Flitwick. "I think we have to persuade them that their children will be safe at Hogwarts."

"You mean, I have to persuade them," corrected McGonagall. "Very well, Harry, you may attend. Yes, Hermione?"

"I was thinking, Professor, as a professor and one of the ones who can use—"

"I was planning on only taking the Heads of House," interrupted McGonagall, "but I suppose you do have a point. You may attend as well. You can assure the parents that you will keep Harry safe as he keeps their children safe. By the way, Harry, you will probably have to answer questions about teaching combat flying. Two of the owls I received mentioned it; some parents may think that you are attempting to convince their children to take part in a dangerous battle. I know

that is not your intention,” she said quickly, heading off his objection, “I am just telling you what a few may think. You may want to emphasize that you are teaching it only to those who are seventeen, or who may be seventeen by the end of the term.”

Harry found that he hadn’t thought about parents disapproving of his teaching combat flying because their children might want to take part in a battle. He had felt as though he was helping people by preparing them for a battle they would want to fight anyway, but he wondered how many might participate now who wouldn’t have before.

“Oh, Harry, what Hermione said reminded me,” said Sprout. “You’re doing the testing this week, how are they doing? No new 100’s, I suppose?”

“Afraid not,” he replied. “Some people are getting very close, though. Hedrick had 99, and Augustina, 97. All three Creeveys made big jumps; they’re all in the low nineties. Oh, and this morning, I had your Hufflepuff fifth years; some of them had pretty big jumps. You said they were doing their own sessions, right?”

She nodded. “And the third years.”

“Yes, they did well, too,” he said. “And the Creeveys are part of a group of Gryffindors of a few different years who asked Ginny to help them with their own sessions. So it looks like people who had their own sessions had much more improvement than the ones who didn’t.”

“That may get more groups going,” said Sprout.

“Archibald, I wanted to ask what you thought of that analysis article in the Prophet this morning, about people getting angrier about the Death Eaters,” said Hermione. “I know you probably don’t have firsthand knowledge of this, but do you think it sounds accurate, or like there’s a ‘point of view’ to it?”

“That’s the one that said that the Ministry was considering giving Aurors permission to kill, right?” asked Sprout.

Dentus nodded. "I'm not sure, Hermione. If I had to guess, I'd say it was pretty accurate. They've been ramping up the killings lately, including the ones this week. That kind of attitude doesn't surprise me at all."

Harry was grateful that Hermione had read him the article, so he knew enough to comment. "But what that article didn't say was that being able to kill is going to make almost no difference at all to the Aurors, it's not going to make people any safer. There are very few situations where incapacitating isn't enough, where killing is necessary."

"That may be, you'd know better than I would," agreed Dentus. "But this isn't so much about increasing the Aurors' effectiveness. This is symbolic, and political. If the Ministry did this, it would be about responding to public anger over all the deaths."

Snape spoke next, surprising Harry; Snape rarely spoke in staff room discussions unless asked a question. "In addition, it would be a message to Death Eaters, meant to unnerve them and make them less bold. It would be a psychological weapon for the Aurors, useful to them even if they never used a Killing Curse. You may want to discuss it with them."

Now Harry understood why Snape had spoken; he was trying to make a point to Harry, that he needed to think about larger issues than his basic aversion to killing. Harry also knew that as a practical matter, Aurors already had the right to kill; unless they mistakenly killed an innocent person, they would never be brought to account for killing. "I will," said Harry to Snape.

Fifteen minutes later, Harry and Hermione walked into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Hermione took her usual seat; as Harry approached the front of the room, he felt a tap on his arm. Turning in surprise, he looked down at Sally-Anne Perks. Looking nervous, she made a small directional gesture in front of her body. "What's he doing here?" she half-whispered. Harry looked in the direction she was pointing, and saw Blaise's ghost, standing in the far corner of the room.

Eyebrows rising, he found himself wondering the same thing she was. He reversed direction, walking towards the back of the class, then a few steps in Blaise's direction.

"Hi, Blaise," he said, in as friendly and casual a tone as he could manage. "Can I help you with something?"

Blaise looked surprised at the question. "No, not really. Just wanted to join the class, is all. I would sit down, but I can't, so..."

Harry's eyebrows narrowed in puzzlement. "Yes, but you wouldn't be able to, you know, practice or anything."

"I know, but this class is usually pretty interesting anyway," said Blaise. "There's really not that much to do, as a ghost."

"Really?" asked Harry. "I'd have thought there was a lot, since you can go anywhere. Well, it's a little unusual; you know we usually don't have ghosts in classes. Could you let me talk to the class about it for a minute? If you could just wait out in the hall..."

"Okay," said Blaise agreeably, and drifted through the wall into the hall.

Harry soundproofed the room as he walked to the front of the class. "I assume you're uncomfortable with him being here?" he asked Sally-Anne.

"Well, yeah," she said, as if it were obvious. "I mean, he's a ghost..."

Two rows away, Neville spoke up. "Why is that a problem? There are ghosts all over the place here."

"But not in classes," responded Sally-Anne.

"There was Professor Binns," Neville pointed out.

"That was different," she argued.

"Why?" asked Neville simply. She gave him an exasperated look, but didn't answer.

"Does anyone else have a problem with Blaise being here, as long as he doesn't talk or participate?" Harry asked the class. No one raised a hand, so Harry turned to Sally-Anne. He recalled that she had been friends with Lisa, so he tried

another approach. “Let me ask you, Sally-Anne... if it were Lisa’s ghost, would you have a problem with it?” She looked down uncomfortably, and thought for a few seconds. Then she sighed, and gestured her acquiescence. Harry walked out to the hall, invited Blaise in, and resumed his place in front of the class.

First he tested everyone on the energy of love; everyone knew they’d be checked that day, and he wanted to get it out of the way, so people wouldn’t be thinking about it all the time in class. Everyone’s score improved over the previous test, by a range of two to ten points. Except for Harry’s four friends, the highest score was Susan’s 93, followed by Justin’s 92. As Susan sat down after getting her score, Justin said, “I guess we need some more practice. Looks like it’s back to the couples’ places for us.”

Harry joined in the class’s laughter, then added, “And vacation’s almost here, so you can do even better than that.”

“So, that’s a homework assignment, right?” asked Justin, to more laughter. “I mean, it would be nice to say to my mum, ‘Susan and I have to go upstairs to do our homework,’ and have it be true.”

“Sorry, I think I have to be able to deny that,” said Harry. He then praised the class for their progress, and started that class’s energy-of-love session. Thirty minutes later, he said, “Okay, now, today’s topic is area-effect spells. Not how to do them, of course, but how to defend against them. There are two main ways. The best one is if you happen to know the counter-curse to the spell being done, you can just use it. The other one is the one I’ll be teaching you today; it’s only a temporary measure, good for some basic protection for a few seconds while you can hopefully get out of the area of the spell. Now, the—”

“Harry?” said Blaise timidly. Most of the class turned to look at Blaise.

Harry was so surprised he didn’t think to chastise Blaise. “What is it?”

“I’m sorry, I know I wasn’t supposed to talk, but I have a message for you. The message is: ‘You’re going to be called. It’s a trap.’”

A chill ran down Harry's spine as everyone turned to stare at Blaise. Harry walked over to the right side of the room, closer to his four friends. Fawkes and Flora appeared almost simultaneously, perching on the podium and Hermione's desk, respectively. "How does he know that?" asked Harry, of no one in particular.

"I told you, it was a message," said Blaise.

"No, I don't mean you, I mean him," said Harry absently.

"Who's the message from, Blaise?" asked Dean, sitting at the back of the room, closest to Blaise.

Before Harry had a chance to tell Blaise not to answer, he did. "Professor Dumbledore," he said.

There was a gasp. "And you mustn't repeat that to anyone," instructed Harry, "which Professor McGonagall will be telling you as well." Turning to his friends, he said, "I assume he means from the Aurors, in which case, we'll all get the call."

"If we get it, Harry, don't go," urged Hermione. "Stay here, let us go."

He stared at her incredulously. "Oh, yeah, good idea. I'll do that."

"I'm serious!" she shouted. "You know Albus isn't usually your eye-in-the-sky, he wouldn't have warned you unless it was really serious! You can't go!"

"I have to, you know that," he responded. "The Aurors are counting on me to be there, I can't just not show up! It could be Voldemort!" As Harry spoke, Ron stood next to Harry and took his left hand, an unspoken request to be taken along by Apparation rather than by the phoenixes. Fawkes and Flora disappeared.

"Harry, it's a trap! He just said so! Look, go to the Aurors, tell Kingsley—"

"Good idea," he agreed, and Disapparated, taking Ron with him; the instant before he disappeared, he saw McGonagall appear with Flora in the classroom.

Harry and Ron had barely arrived at the detection room when their pendants went off, with the alarm that indicated an all-out alert. The room was a whirl of activity, with a dozen Aurors rushing in, and more than a dozen more

Apparating in over the next few seconds. Still holding Ron's hand, Harry took in the information from the wall, and quickly Disapparated.

He and Ron Apparated into a lightly wooded area; it looked like the same place where they had caught the last Death Eater to end the Apparation crisis in the summer. The scene was chaotic: spells were flying through the air, Aurors were Apparating in, and a half dozen Aurors were on the ground, dead or unconscious. A quick glance told Harry that there were about fifty adversaries, but from their robes, most weren't Death Eaters. He looked around to see who needed protection from Killing Curses, and started putting them up.

A second later, Hermione and Neville were rushing at him. "Harry, look out!" shouted Hermione. Something seemed wrong with her voice, but he couldn't place it right away. Hermione and Neville plowed into him and Ron, knocking them to the ground. Harry felt himself losing consciousness rapidly, and barely had time to wonder why. Over Hermione's shoulder, he looked up to see Flora suddenly appear, carrying Hermione and Neville. Harry lost consciousness as he was Disapparated away.

As Harry struggled for consciousness, the first thing he was aware of was the memory flashing through his mind. He saw himself talking to Dumbledore and Snape in the middle of the night, Dumbledore explaining the Cleansing, and how he hoped Harry would help Snape. After a minute, the scene changed, and he was remembering his first energy-of-love session with the Aurors. As that memory played through his mind, he slowly returned to consciousness, and slowly became aware of his situation. He was lying on his back, legs straight, arms at his sides. They must have done the Full-Body Bind on me, he thought. He flexed a pinky to see if he could move; he could, so he concluded it must have worn off.

Eyes still closed, he remembered what had happened just before he lost consciousness, and he suddenly knew with certainty that he was with Voldemort, a captive. But why no ropes? he wondered. Why just a Full-Body Bind that's worn

off? He became aware of a few other things: a sound, the sound of an engine, which he had heard once before, in the planes he had boarded in September. The floor rocked slightly; he realized he was on a plane. He also realized that Voldemort was doing Legilimens on him, viewing memories. Oh, no, he thought, Snape is blown. His next thought was, why hasn't he noticed I've woken up? He thought that Voldemort would notice mentally, if not by Harry's movements. But Voldemort didn't notice; he went on to a different memory, one of Harry discussing with Kingsley the restrictions against killing for those who wanted to learn the energy of love.

I can move, thought Harry, and he doesn't know I can. What should I do? The Imperius Charm? No, he'd just disappear... the device! I have to find it! Deciding to take a chance, he opened his eyes as little as he could manage. The first thing he saw was Voldemort's torso; clearly he was lying on his side, very close to Harry. Harry opened his eyes a little wider, and saw that they were in a very small, enclosed space; he guessed that in all, it was probably a little bit longer, wider, and higher than a coffin, but not much. He realized the reason immediately: people couldn't Apparate onto moving objects, which was the reason for the plane, and a phoenix wouldn't be able to appear into such a small space. Voldemort had gone to a lot of trouble to see that they weren't disturbed.

As the memory Voldemort was watching continued, Harry looked around more, and saw, on Voldemort's wrist, a thick, silver bracelet. That has to be it, he thought. He knew he would have only one chance, that Voldemort could probably incapacitate him quickly if he failed. He had a last-second, absurd thought before he acted: If this turns out to be just a bracelet, I'm going to feel pretty stupid. He focused all his energy on a Severing Charm, and raising his right hand quickly, brought it down, imagining himself chopping something hard with a heavy knife. Voldemort's hand instantly separated from his wrist, and the bracelet fell off.

Voldemort screamed and lurched upwards, hitting his head on the top of the container they were in, as blood spurted onto Harry's hands, torso, then face, as

Voldemort thrashed about in pain and shock. Rolling onto his side quickly, Harry snatched Voldemort's wand away, and in one quick motion, performed the Imperius Charm. Unlike Snape and Malfoy, Voldemort went unconscious instantly. In the same instant, Harry felt his hand being burned; he felt as if he were holding a red-hot poker rather than a wand. He dropped it immediately, then looked at his hand. The skin was raw and burned in exactly the places he had been holding the wand.

Grimacing in pain, he considered what to do next. Where was his wand? Probably not on the plane, he thought. Think, he told himself. Can I get out of this... whatever it is we're in? There were holes in the sides for air, but the top was solid. He pushed against it with his left hand, but it didn't move. He wished Fawkes could get in and take him away, but he realized that that was the whole point of such a confined space.

Can I even do anything to him? Harry wondered. Without a wand, there's nothing I can do... oh, wait, I might be able to do Legilimens, sometimes you do that without a wand. It's worth a try...

Harry focused hard, and easily gained access to Voldemort's unconscious mind. He called up recent memories, and saw Voldemort crawling into the compartment after the Death Eater masquerading as Hermione had crawled out, the plane engines already running. Voldemort moved Harry into a certain position, did the Full-Body Bind, then placed a Confundus Beam next to Harry's head, then turned it on. Ah, so that's why he thought I'd never be able to do anything, Harry thought, he thought I couldn't even if I woke up. Didn't he know I had that artifact I took from that assassin? Maybe the assassin hadn't told him about it.

Harry saw Voldemort begin to view memories; conscious of how little time he might have, he skipped ahead. He reached a point at which Voldemort had found most of the important information: Snape's spying, the prophecy, Dumbledore's assistance in rendering Voldemort unconscious, how Harry taught the energy of love, and the nature of the Imperius Charm. He saw Voldemort decide to kill him, raise his wand... and suddenly go unconscious. The memory

continued when Voldemort regained consciousness. Harry saw Voldemort in tremendous fear, truly realizing and believing for the first time that Dumbledore had a purpose for dying. Making an impulsive decision, Voldemort suddenly pointed the wand at Harry, as if he could kill Harry by acting too fast for Dumbledore to stop him. Voldemort went unconscious again.

The next thing Harry felt Voldemort feel, upon awakening, was terror, almost paralyzing fear. Voldemort realized that Dumbledore could make him unconscious whenever he wanted, and there was nothing he could do to stop Dumbledore. Or was there? He resolved to research methods of fending off supernatural attacks, if there were any. Or he would create one, but one way or the other, Dumbledore would be stopped. Harry saw, however, an even deeper fear strike Voldemort: that he had been wrong in not believing in an afterlife. Voldemort wasn't convinced that there was one, but clearly for the first time, he was seriously entertaining the possibility. Harry couldn't understand why Voldemort feared such a thought so much, and couldn't find out by viewing the memory.

Next, Harry watched as Voldemort adjusted the bracelet; Harry understood that Voldemort was activating it, so that the next time he went unconscious, he would be transported away. Harry didn't have time to wonder why he had switched it off in the first place; by viewing the memory, he understood immediately. The device subjected Voldemort to the same restrictions as Apparating: he could not Apparate from a moving object to the ground, so he would have to be transported somewhere in midair. He would then have to be caught by someone on a broom at the proper place, and while Voldemort was sure of his helpers' loyalty, he preferred not to trust them with his life unless there was simply no other option. He had deactivated the bracelet as a precaution, in case Harry could do his spell even while under the influence of the Confundus Beam; he preferred to wake up in the same place and kill Harry when he did. After Dumbledore made him unconscious twice in a row, however, Voldemort realized that both had happened just before he had tried to kill Harry. He decided not to try again to kill Harry, but wait for the plane to

land, and have one of his Death Eaters do it. He activated the bracelet in fear that Dumbledore might continue rendering him unconscious whether he tried to kill Harry or not, and he didn't want to risk the Confundus Beam giving out. Harry felt Voldemort's fury, his feeling of impotence. In enclosed quarters with a wandless and defenseless seventeen-year-old, he couldn't kill him, and was in fact in danger himself. Voldemort's next thought was a dawning realization, that...

Voldemort started to stir, and Harry forced his concentration away from what he was watching, withdrawing from Voldemort's mind. This is going to hurt, he thought grimly. Using material from his robes to protect his hand at first—like taking something out of the oven with an oven mitt, he thought—he then grabbed it with his right hand just long enough to do the Imperius Charm again, then dropped it, howling in pain, as Voldemort went unconscious again. Thank God burns heal well with magic, thought Harry; enough of this, and my hand's not going to have any skin left. As he glanced at the wand, he also noticed that a part of Voldemort's robe was drenched in blood, and that blood was still coming out of his wrist. He wondered whether Voldemort might die of blood loss, but decided he shouldn't worry about that one way or the other, but continue doing what he was doing.

Harry cast Legilimens again, and tried to find the same memory he had been viewing when Voldemort had awakened. It took him a half a minute to do so. He felt Voldemort realize that there was a possibility that Harry could do even more damage than he had so far. Voldemort thought about the phrase from the prophecy, 'He will mark him as his equal,' suggesting that any power that Voldemort had, Harry would have it, or its equivalent. Voldemort wondered whether Harry could use what he called love—all evidence to the contrary, Voldemort still thought that what Harry used was simply another kind of power, not love—to do something equivalent to the Cleansing? Is that how I'm being rendered unconscious? Harry saw Voldemort wonder.

Harry gasped in sudden realization; in an instant, he knew. He knew what he was going to do, how he was going to defeat Voldemort. I can do the Cleansing,

only with love instead, he thought. His mind is as if it's been Cleansed, like he did it himself, which is why he can't tolerate love. If I do a reverse Cleansing on him, his mind won't be able to tolerate evil, rather than love. He takes off every time love invades his mind; after I do this, if I can, evil won't be able to stay there, like love can't now. He might end up as Tom Riddle, or insane, or comatose, but when I'm done with him, whatever it is that makes him Voldemort won't be able to survive in his mind.

But can I really do it? he asked himself. How do I do it? He realized at once that the answer to that question was another question: How does Voldemort do the Cleansing? With a new sense of urgency, he cast Legilimens on Voldemort again. He had to know exactly what was involved. He searched for Voldemort's memory of having done the Cleansing on Snape, and started viewing. After a minute, distracted by Snape's screaming in the memory, he started again from the beginning. He tried to focus only on what Voldemort was doing, how he saw Snape's mind, what he looked for, exactly what he did when. He felt as though he were trying to learn surgery by watching, but he knew there was nothing else he could do.

Concentrating intently, he watched for ten minutes, taking in every detail he could. He tried to ignore how sickened he felt, watching what Snape was being put through, how Voldemort enjoyed doing what he was doing. He felt Voldemort feel that he was doing Snape a favor as well as making him a useful tool. After ten minutes, Harry felt that he more or less knew what Voldemort did, but was still no nearer knowing exactly how to do the opposite. Was it just a matter of calling up the same memories Voldemort did, then doing the same thing with love that Voldemort did with pain? Can I do it without a wand? Well, let's give it a try, he thought.

He focused on calling up a memory of love, but after a minute of trying, had found nothing. This is going to be harder than I thought, he thought dejectedly. Does he really have no memories of love whatsoever? Or are they just buried so deeply that I can't get at them? He decided to try for happiness instead, pure

happiness not derived from someone else's suffering. He searched for another minute, then found a memory from early childhood; a kind word and a hug from a woman at the orphanage. Harry tried to apply love as Voldemort had applied pain, but nothing seemed to happen. Does he have to be conscious for this to work? wondered Harry. Worse yet, does he have to consent? Albus said that consent was necessary for the Cleansing, could it be the same for this? No, it can't be, he told himself. This is what I have to do, I know it. I'll be able to do it without his consent.

Harry paused for a few seconds, then decided to try again. He called up the same memory, then concentrated hard on love, on imprinting it into Voldemort's mind. He imagined that the first step would be the hardest, but once there was a tiny spot in Voldemort's mind that could handle love, he could work from there to spread it around the rest of Voldemort's mind. He continued for another thirty seconds; suddenly, Voldemort let out a deafening scream, worse than Harry had ever heard. In the middle of the scream, with a popping noise, he Disappeared.

"Dammit!" yelled Harry, pounding the bottom of the container with his fist, then howling in pain again as he had somehow forgotten about the burns on his hand. You moron, he said to himself. How did he do that? I guess, like the thing with kids, it can happen automatically when you're in a dire situation. That probably hurt him as badly as anything has in many years, maybe even worse than when his Curse backfired. He's going to be terrified of me now. Good.

What now, he thought. He looked around the container, and saw three things: Voldemort's wand, Voldemort's bracelet... and Voldemort's dismembered hand. I should take all three, he thought, even though the idea disgusted him; he knew the hand could possibly be used against Voldemort in some way, though he had little idea how. He would definitely take the bracelet, and as for the wand... he dreaded the thought of using it again, but he knew he couldn't get away without it. The alternative would be to wait until the plane landed, where there would be Death Eaters meeting it. I still have some skin somewhere on that hand, he thought with dark humor.

Again using material from his robes to cover his hand at first, he gingerly picked up the wand. To his surprise, it felt cool. He quickly touched it with his bare hand, then finally held it firmly between his thumb and pinky, the only parts of his right hand not badly burned. Holding it caused great pain from having to move the hand at all, but not from the wand. Finally, he conjured a thick white cloth; the wand's temperature didn't change. "Sure, now you don't burn me," he said to the wand. "I could have used this five minutes ago." Taking the wand in his left hand and hoping it didn't decide to heat up again, he levitated the hand and the bracelet onto the cloth, wrapped it, and put it into his robes.

He then Disapparated to a spot a few thousand feet above the plane, just to be safe, since he didn't know its altitude. Falling, he saw Fawkes appear a second later, falling with him. He put Voldemort's wand inside his robes and grabbed Fawkes's tail, being careful to do it with his left hand rather than his right, as he usually did. Fawkes helped him decelerate. When he had fully decelerated, he asked Fawkes to take him to wherever Ginny was.

He was suddenly a few inches from the floor of the standby area, next to the Aurors' Apparation detection room. "Harry!" shrieked Ginny, leaping to her feet and hugging him hard. He hugged her back gratefully, again protecting his right hand, making sure it touched nothing. She kissed him quickly, then hugged him again. When she finally let him go, he saw that they were surrounded by his other four friends, McGonagall, and Kingsley, with a dozen Aurors further back.

McGonagall had an expression of deep concern. "Are you all right? That blood..."

Harry had forgotten that he had been liberally splashed with blood; now that he thought about it, he realized there was some on his glasses. "It's his. Well, it's mine, really, but it came from him. He's all right too, unfortunately, but..." He reached into his robes with his left hand and pulled out the cloth, handing it to Kingsley. "I thought this might be useful, but you'll know what to do with it better than me."

Kingsley, seeing that some red had stained the cloth, opened it gingerly. When he exposed the hand, the bracelet around the stump, there was a collective gasp. Kingsley looked at Harry in astonishment, Ron and Neville's mouths dropped open, and Hermione made a noise that sounded like a squeak. After a few seconds, Ron managed, "I, um, I see you figured out a way to get the device off?"

From behind Harry, Snape spoke. "That is all well and good, Professor," he said as Harry turned to look at him. "But, where is the rest of him?"

Leave it to Snape to put it that way, thought Harry. "The bad news is, the rest of him got away. But the good news is, I think I know how I'm going to beat him."

"Wrong," said Ginny firmly, as Harry turned back to look at her. "The good news is, you're alive and well. The rest is just icing on the cake."

He smiled at her, his first smile for quite a while. "Come on, I need to tell you what happened. Kingsley, where should we do it?"

"The main meeting room, it should seat all of us. You six, me, Professors Snape and McGonagall... and if you don't mind, Harry, I'd like to get the Minister here too, let him hear this firsthand."

"Sure, that's fine," agreed Harry. "Let's go." He started for the conference room, his friends right behind. On his right side, Ginny happily took his right hand, squeezing it firmly. Harry screamed in pain, startling most everyone in the room.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, let me see," said Ginny, mortified to have caused him such pain. "Let me... oh, Harry, why in the world didn't you say anything?" she asked in disbelief. "You have to get that taken care of right now! That looks awful!"

"It's no fun," he agreed. "But I need to tell you about this right away, it could have time value. I don't know if it will, just that it could. Just don't touch my hand, and it'll be all right for a while."

McGonagall walked over and took his right arm by the wrist to look at his hand, and winced. "Yes, I'm sure it will be fine," she said dryly. "I will get someone from St. Mungo's. Kingsley, may I..."

He nodded, and she Disapparated. The six continued walking to the conference room; along the way, Harry took out Voldemort's wand and Summoned his own. He knew it probably wouldn't arrive for a while, but was confident that it would. "I want to ask you all kinds of questions, but I know they'll be answered when you tell the story," said Ginny. "Thank goodness for the phoenixes."

Harry glanced at her in surprise, since they hadn't been able to help him, except at the end. "She means, because they kept us informed about your emotional state," explained Hermione. "We knew that you were unconscious for a while, that was when we were most worried; Ginny kept staring at her hand. Then I got a message from Albus, through the phoenixes; he said that you would need to concentrate, and that I shouldn't try to send you messages through Fawkes and Flora, and Ginny shouldn't look at her hand."

"It was really hard," said Ginny, and Harry knew it was an understatement.

"I got two bursts of pain, which I assume was when your hand got like that," continued Hermione as Harry nodded. "Near the end, I got a strong sense of... I guess you could say, revelation, like you finally understood something, something about Voldemort. I'll be very interested to hear what it is."

"I'll be very interested to know if it's right," he said as they entered the conference room. The table was a circle that seated twelve, so they all sat next to each other. "What happened at the site, where I got taken from?"

Neville looked somber. "Six Aurors responded to the call, as usual. You saw how many were waiting there, all using Killing Curses. Five of the six were killed."

"Oh, God," said Harry, in deep sorrow. Ginny reached over for his hand, then backed away at the last second, remembering, and gripped his forearm instead. "That's horrible. But I'm almost surprised it wasn't all six."

"The sixth was Winston," said Neville. "He put up a Killing Curse shield. He had no idea that he could do it until that moment."

Harry knew he would be extremely pleased under different circumstances. "Hell of a way to find out."

“That’s exactly what he said,” said Neville. “But yeah, this is really bad. That many Aurors haven’t died at once for a very long time. Now we’re down to thirty-three, not including us.” Harry noticed that it was the first time that Neville had referred to the Aurors as ‘we.’ He obviously felt the deaths very strongly as well.

“But there were no more deaths after I was taken?”

“No, by then we had shields, and better numbers,” said Neville. “All five of us were putting up shields like crazy, and we started winning the battle pretty quickly. The attackers started getting away, either by Disapparating or using Portkeys; we think they had a whole bunch set up before the thing started. We ended up capturing about twenty of them. Kingsley’s talked to a few of them, and apparently a lot have American accents.” No surprise, thought Harry.

Snape soon entered, followed shortly by Kingsley and Bright, who approached Harry. “Harry, I’m very glad to hear...” He extended a hand as he spoke, and trailed off because Harry held up his right hand to explain why he didn’t shake Bright’s. “...that you’re largely all right,” finished Bright, clearly taken aback by what he saw.

“It...” Harry chuckled at what he had been about to say. “I was going to say it’s not as bad as it looks, but that would be a lie, it’s pretty painful. It’s just that I know it’s fairly easily fixable.”

“Yes, it’s not as though you lost your hand entirely,” joked Neville.

“He can just make himself another one,” responded Harry.

McGonagall and an older woman in green Healer’s robes entered the room. “Harry, this is Healer Haspberg, she is the senior Healer, and an old friend.”

Harry nodded to her. “Professor,” she said, kneeling next to his chair and taking his right wrist. “Oh, dear. How did this happen?” She cast a spell, and his hand suddenly felt much less pain.

“Voldemort’s wand,” said Harry. “For some reason, until he was gone, it burned my hand badly both times I tried to use it, like it was on fire.”

“An uncommon defensive Dark Arts spell,” remarked Snape. “The wand will burn the hand of anyone who tries to use it against its owner.” Ah, that’s why I was able to use it after Voldemort got away, thought Harry. “You are the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, you should have known that.”

“Albus did tell me that he didn’t hire me for my encyclopedic knowledge of the topic,” countered Harry, mildly annoyed at Snape. “But I’ll be sure to mention it in my classes from now on. ‘Don’t try to use Voldemort’s wand against him.’”

Everyone was in a chair except Haspberg, who was working on Harry’s hand. “You may begin, Professor,” said McGonagall.

“Obviously, I don’t know much that happened until I woke up,” began Harry. “Apparently they Apparated me to the inside of a small container inside a plane, which took off shortly after they put me in it, and Voldemort went in there with me. When I woke up, memories were flashing through my head. I think he had been doing it for at least twenty minutes.” He looked at Snape sadly, knowing how it would affect him. “I’m sorry, Professor, but he knows about you now.”

Everyone looked at Snape, who seemed to be making a supreme effort to hold his emotions in check, and barely succeeding. “I feared as much,” he said quietly and bitterly. “I feared that your stupidity would cost us dearly, and I was correct.”

“Professor!” said McGonagall reprovingly.

Her reprimand only seemed to anger Snape further. “He warned you!” he shouted at Harry. “The headmaster warned you that it was a trap, but you went anyway! She asked you not to go,” Snape gestured to Hermione, “and you mocked her! They are the two people whose opinion you hold in the highest regard, and you completely ignored them both, because after all, you are Harry Potter, nothing could possibly ever happen to you—”

“That’s not the reason, and you know it!” responded Harry in what was almost a shout. Trying to keep his voice level, he continued, “I can’t ignore those alarms, they mean Aurors are in danger—”

“You can ignore them if you are warned that there is a trap for you!” shouted Snape. “That is the whole point of the words ‘warning’ and ‘trap!’ I said that your vocabulary was deficient, but I did not dream the problem was this bad,” he added, dripping venom and sarcasm. Bright and Kingsley exchanged glances, apparently wondering about Snape’s stability.

Before Harry could respond, McGonagall spoke. “Professor Snape! This is not the time for a discussion of the appropriateness of Professor Potter’s actions, not to mention insults. Now, please hold your tongue unless you have something pertinent to contribute.” Seething with anger, Snape stared at her, but said nothing. Harry felt angry with Snape, but could understand why Snape was so angry.

“Um, anyway,” said a discomfited Harry, “He knows everything now: the prophecy, the relays, everything I know. Including the fact that I had no idea how I was going to defeat him.”

Harry went on to describe the rest of what had happened. When he got to the point where he used the Imperius Charm on Voldemort and started using Legilimens on him, Snape interrupted. “Forgive me for asking a stupid question,” he sneered, “but why did you not at this point simply kill him?”

“How?” responded an annoyed Harry. “I didn’t have a wand I could use—”

“You could have simply strangled him,” pointed out Snape. “You put your hands around the person’s neck, and squeeze as hard as you can. I would be happy to demonstrate the procedure—”

“Professor Snape,” warned McGonagall.

“Even with that wand... I would hold onto a red-hot wand for as long as it took to kill the Dark Lord,” continued Snape with anger and intensity, “until the hand was a lump of dead flesh. I would have thought you would too, even if it were your precious left hand.”

“Hey!” shouted Ginny, leaping to her feet.

“Leave her out of this!” shouted Harry, now truly angry. “Look, you knew this already, that I couldn’t kill him—”

“You mean ‘wouldn’t,’ not ‘couldn’t,’ corrected Snape. “And you did not even have to kill him! You could have held onto him, Disapparated out, and brought him back here!”

“The wand—”

“Would only burn your hand if you were using it against him, which you would not have been.”

“I didn’t know—”

“Of course not,” sneered Snape. “But even so, you could have held onto it for long enough to Disapparate.”

“You said last year there can be magical defenses against being involuntarily—”

“You could have checked, using Legilimens!”

“Voldemort could have woken up in the meantime—”

“That was not the reason you didn’t do it! The reason is that you didn’t think of it! Tell me that’s not true!” Harry gave Snape a look of smoldering anger, but said nothing. “I thought as much,” continued Snape derisively. “That should be what it says on your tombstone. ‘Here lies Harry Potter. He didn’t think.’ It’s Grindelwald all over again.”

Hermione wheeled on Snape, furious, as Harry could see the rest of his friends were getting. “That is so unfair, and such a totally different situation—”

“Hermione,” interrupted McGonagall. Turning to Snape, quietly and very seriously, she said, “Professor, I understand what this means for you. I am trying to be tolerant, and I can see that Harry is too. But you will act appropriately, or you will be asked to leave.” Harry saw the look Snape gave McGonagall in response, and wondered whether Snape could keep it together. Harry tried to calm himself, and after a half a minute, continued.

Sighing, he said, “Much as I hate to admit it, Professor Snape was right about one thing. I didn’t consider the possibility of using the wand for just as long

as it took to Disapparate us both out of there. Once the wand started burning my hand like that, I just didn't think of it as something I could use."

"Harry, from early childhood, we are taught not to touch or grab very hot things, both by our parents and by experience," said Bright reassuringly, with a quick, annoyed glance at Snape. "That you thought that way is... extremely understandable." Snape scoffed silently, but made no noise.

"Well, I wish I had at least thought of it," said Harry. "Anyway, by doing Legilimens on him, I found out what had happened until then. He had tried to kill me twice, and Albus had done his thing to him both times. Voldemort started to wake up, and I had to grab the wand to put him out again." Harry saw Ron and Pansy wince in sympathy. "When I did Legilimens on him next—"

"Excuse me, I'm sorry to interrupt," said Haspberg. "I've done as much as can be done with your hand, Professor. It is now in a field which extends a half an inch from all injured parts of your hand; your hand will get a small shock if it gets that close to anything. This is to remind you not to use your hand in any way. The field will decrease in intensity as your hand heals; you should be able to use it again in two days. Please come to St. Mungo's tomorrow for another check. Can you do that?"

"I'll drag him if I have to," answered Ginny for him.

"Don't worry, he'll be there," added Hermione.

"Their job is to protect me, but also from myself, apparently," joked Harry.

"Somebody has to," retorted Ginny.

"Anyway, it feels much better, thank you very much," said Harry to Haspberg.

She nodded her acknowledgment, and left, with a nod of thanks from McGonagall. "Where was I... Oh, yes. I did Legilimens on him again, and I found that after he woke up the second time, he had this overwhelming fear. A fear of the unknown, of something he had absolutely no control over. It was like, his worst nightmare had come true. Then I saw him think something that made the light bulb

go on over my head. He had seen the prophecy, the part about my being his equal. He wondered if I'd be able to do something like the Cleansing, and I suddenly realized—”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” interrupted Bright. “The what?”

“It’s this thing that Voldemort does—”

“Professor!” said Snape loudly in warning.

Harry looked to McGonagall for support. “I have to explain it, Professor. It has to do with how I think I’m going to beat him, but it won’t make any sense unless I explain the Cleansing.” McGonagall hesitated, then gestured for him to continue. Very frustrated, Snape again managed not to speak.

Harry explained the Cleansing, to the horrified looks of those who had never heard about it; he thought he saw most people sneak glances at Snape, making the correct conclusions about him and the reasons for his usual behavior. “So, obviously the Imperius Charm is very different from the Cleansing, but it’s not impossible that I could do something like that. Who knows, maybe it would make the person completely happy, never able to have a negative emotion. I don’t know; obviously, I wouldn’t even think about changing someone permanently that way. But it made me think of something. The way he is, it’s like he did the Cleansing to himself. I thought, maybe I could do—”

“A Cleansing in reverse!” interrupted Hermione, gaping. “Oh, my God! That could work! You wouldn’t have to kill him, it’s consistent with the energy of love, and he would end up... harmless.”

McGonagall was astonished at the idea. “Do you really think it could work?”

“I didn’t know,” he replied, “but I decided that I had to find out; I didn’t know how much time I had, but I knew that I might not get the chance again. I did Legilimency on him, watching him very closely, do the Cleansing to someone. It wasn’t pleasant,” he added in an aside. “Then I decided to try my idea on him. At first it didn’t work, then I tried again; I tried to imprint love in there, as hard as I

could. After a minute, he just let out this awful, terrible scream, and Disapparated. Without a wand. The scream was... amazing, it was as if I had wounded him horribly.”

“You did,” said Snape, anger gone, looking thoughtful. “You inflicted a wound on him that is nearly debilitating, worse than he would have imagined could have been done. If I were a wagering person, I would wager everything I own that as we speak, he is still screaming in pain, that he has not stopped since he escaped you.”

Harry looked around the table, and saw amazement on everyone’s faces. “He will repair himself, though it may take some time,” continued Snape. “But Professor Potter is correct; what he suggests will be effective, if he can do it. The problem is, of course, incapacitating him for long enough to do it. It would be far easier to simply kill him.”

“The energy of love giveth, and it taketh away,” commented Kingsley. “Maybe Harry can’t kill, but he couldn’t have done a tenth of what he has if not for the energy of love.” With a stern glance at Snape, he added, “There are limitations it puts on him, and if not killing is one of them, we have to accept that.”

“Or, he can bring us the Dark Lord unconscious, and we can kill him,” said Snape. “I am certain there would be no shortage of volunteers.”

“Especially after today,” agreed Kingsley grimly. “But if Harry has the opportunity to do this, I’m not so sure I’d tell him not to bother. The only reason Voldemort got away was that Harry wasn’t able to put down an anti-Disapparation field. If he tries to move Voldemort, it increases the chances that he could get away. If Harry can keep him in the same place and do this to him, it may be worth doing.”

“There’s another reason to, I think,” added Harry. “If we just killed him, who’s to say he’d really die? He didn’t last time. He just hovered around, and came back. He might manage to do it again someday. I think this may be the reason the

prophecy uses the word ‘vanquish’ instead of ‘kill.’ Maybe killing him isn’t enough, maybe the only way to truly defeat him is to do this.”

“Excuse me, Harry,” said Bright. “I am not familiar with the entire prophecy. Now that Voldemort knows it, do you think it is safe...”

Harry looked at McGonagall. “I’d think it is. After all, nothing in it is any surprise by now, it’s kind of obvious.” She thought for a few seconds, and gestured her assent. He recited it; when he was finished, he commented, “If he’d known this all along, he might have put a greater priority on killing me much earlier, and probably would have succeeded. The part about my being his equal would have made him worry. Now, this is all pretty much stuff we know; it’s all come true.”

“The first serious evidence of it was when you came up with the Cruciatius Curse shield,” mused Hermione aloud.

Snape gave a sudden start. He wore an awed expression, a look that Harry had never seen on him before. “Professor Potter... a thought has just occurred to me. You are not sure exactly how to do this... reverse Cleansing. You should practice it.”

Harry’s mouth slowly dropped open, as did those of the others who understood what Snape was suggesting. “Are you crazy?” asked Harry in disbelief. “Do you know what this could do to you? I don’t even know! I barely know how I would do it!”

“You achieved a significant result with the Dark Lord, in a short period of time,” pointed out Snape.

“Yes, and he’s probably screaming in pain right now!” responded Harry. “Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“Only that you started the procedure, but did not finish it,” said Snape. “If you do what I suggest, you would learn valuable lessons that you could apply to the Dark Lord, if and when you do it to him.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt again,” said Bright, “but I keep feeling that there are too many things of which I’m not aware...”

“Not only you, mate,” said Ron sympathetically. Suddenly realizing what he’d said, he amended, “Er, sorry, Minister.” Harry exchanged a quick grin with Hermione.

“Quite all right, Ron,” said Bright, amused. “Harry, what exactly is Professor Snape suggesting you do?”

“You’ve probably all guessed by now that the Cleansing was done to him, many years ago,” explained Harry. “He basically wants me to undo it, put him back the way he was.” To Snape, he said, “Look, I know you’ve wanted this for a long time, ever since you went to Dumbledore seventeen years ago. I’m not saying I couldn’t do it, someday. But now, it’s just an idea.” Enunciating every word and speaking slowly, he continued, “I... don’t... know... what... I’m... doing! Anything could happen! You could end up dead, or in a coma, or...”

“Or, like his parents?” asked Snape, gesturing at Neville; Harry was surprised that Snape had accurately guessed what he was going to say. “I’m perfectly willing to take the chance—”

“Watch what you say about my parents!” said Neville sharply. Despite Neville’s having lost most of his shyness, it greatly surprised Harry to see Neville talk that way to Snape, whom he had long feared. Harry knew, of course, that Neville was very sensitive to any disrespect to his parents.

“Or what, you’ll unleash your potty mouth on me?” smirked Snape.

“I’ll unleash more than that on you, if you’re not careful!” shouted Neville.

“Such as us, for one thing,” put in Kingsley, his tone a warning. “The Aurors, Professor, would strongly prefer that you did not speak of Frank and Alice with anything but the utmost respect.” Kingsley finished the sentence there, but Harry was sure he understood the additional, unspoken, “if you get my drift.”

Snape rolled his eyes, suggesting that he didn’t care about the Longbottoms one way or the other. “As I was saying, I will take the chance. You must do this.”

“I’d rather wait until I’ve done it to Voldemort—”

“I will not last that long!!” shouted Snape, almost as angry as he’d been over finding out about Blaise and the other boy. “This is you, not thinking again! It is, again, because of your stupidity, your lack of thinking, that my usefulness to the Order has ended. It was difficult enough to endure what I did, for the sake of being useful against the Dark Lord. You know how difficult it was, better than anyone except the headmaster. That was with the enormous incentive of being able to contribute to the Dark Lord’s downfall. Now, there is simply nothing I can do. Even if I tried to make the effort to continue for the sake of continuing, I would fail. I know that. I cannot wait months for you to become skilled enough to do it, or even days. You... must... do... it... now!” he finished, mocking Harry’s earlier way of speaking.

Harry hated to admit it to himself, but he hadn’t thought about Snape’s ability to hold on when considering the question. He loathed the idea that he might inadvertently cause Snape harm, or permanent disability, but who was he to tell Snape that he had to wait, to endure what he did indefinitely? Not to mention that his actions since finding out he could no longer be a spy supported the idea that he could not hold on. Still, he felt there was one more thing that he had to know before he could agree.

“I won’t lie, I’m afraid of what could happen, that I have that kind of responsibility,” said Harry quietly. “But at least, we have to wait a day. I have to talk to the other one, make sure this is what he wants too. He’s a part of this.”

Snape looked incredulous, as if he’d never heard anything so stupid in his life. “Are you insane?” he nearly shrieked. “He is me, I am him! We are the same entity; that is the whole point, the crux of the problem! You said yourself once, people were not meant to live like this! Even if he didn’t want to, I wouldn’t care! It’s all very well for him, with the headmaster and Longbottom’s parents and the whole gang in their little paradise, while I have to suffer down here! He does not have a say in this!”

Ron, Neville, Pansy, Kingsley, and Bright looked baffled; Hermione looked at Harry with regret. “I hate to say it, but he’s right. The other one’s going to say the same thing, you know he will. Not that I’m saying you have to do it today, though. It’s probably better to wait a day, what with all you’ve been through today.”

“Oh, yes, let’s wait for poor Harry to recover from his ordeal,” said Snape with unnecessary sarcasm. “Everyone can pat him on the back, tell him what a great job he did. Hugs all around from the friends, maybe a trip to his quarters so—”

“Professor!” barked McGonagall, now glaring at Snape. Harry started to wonder if Snape could literally wait until tomorrow; his tone suggested that he was becoming more unbalanced by the minute. Harry found that he was no longer angry with Snape, even given all he’d said, but felt sorry for him. It’s easy for me to forget how hard this is for him, Harry thought. Here he just had his biggest emotional blow in sixteen years; the thing he based his life around is gone. Now there’s the possibility that his suffering could end, and I’m all wishy-washy because I’m afraid I might hurt him. It’s probably just more than he can tolerate.

Harry sighed. “I’ll do it tomorrow. I want a chance to talk to Albus and the other one, maybe they can tell me something that’ll help me. I want a chance to think about what I’m going to do, anyway. This is going to be really tricky, and—”

“Headmaster!” shouted Snape, looking slightly up, over everyone’s heads. “Will you tell him, please, that the other one does not mind, and that there is no reason that he cannot do it today, as soon as possible?”

There was a silence, as everyone was somewhat uncomfortable. After a half a minute, Harry got a few images. Hermione caught his eye and nodded, letting him know that she’d gotten them too, through Flora. “The other one doesn’t mind,” she said. “But, Albus says, tomorrow. The sun setting, once.”

Snape closed his eyes and grimaced, then stood and quickly strode from the room. After a second, McGonagall stood. Looking at Bright and Kingsley, she said, “Someone should be with him, and unfortunately, that someone is me. Excuse me.”

She left the room; Harry wondered whether she would catch up with him by the time he reached the fireplace.

In the silence that followed, Ron said, “I must say, I’ve learned things I never would have imagined I would before I sat down here.”

“Not only you, mate,” said Bright with a small grin. Ron smiled back, obviously pleased that the Minister had shared a joke with him. “May I ask, in case I’m the only one here who doesn’t know, who is ‘the other one?’”

“It was a secret, but you know so much at this point, it would be silly not to tell you the rest,” said Harry. “It started the night Albus died, the first time he talked to me...”

CHAPTER 17

AWAKE IN THE DARK

“I still don’t believe it,” said Ron.

Four hours later, after dinner, the six were in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, on the conjured carpet. After leaving the meeting with Bright, Kingsley, and the others, Harry had gone to his Hogwarts quarters, to shower and change. Fawkes had then brought Ginny, just so they could spend some time quietly together. Then he had gone to the staff room after five o’clock, where he jokingly apologized to Dentus for having missed his class. Dentus accepted in good humor, explaining that “since they knew you were in serious danger, nobody was paying attention anyway.” Harry then put in an appearance in Gryffindor Tower, apologetically answering questions as vaguely as possible, since it was up to McGonagall and Kingsley what aspects of what had happened to make public. Then, the six had had a quiet dinner together.

“Don’t believe what, exactly?” asked Ginny.

“The thing with Snape. All of it. Any of it. Him viewing your memories, that you had to tolerate him maybe seeing the ones with you and Ginny... you having to be in the same room with him that much, never mind, care about him. Just the whole thing. I mean, you’ve done stuff that’s impressed me before, Harry, but nothing so much as this. I stand in awe.”

“You’re sitting,” pointed out Pansy.

“Then I sit in awe,” amended Ron, unperturbed, “and if I lay back against you, like this, that will be in awe also.”

“So, generally, you’re awed,” observed Neville.

“That’s the gist of it,” agreed Ron. “I mean, to have to think that you have no privacy whatsoever... I just couldn’t do that. If Dumbledore had asked me that, I’d have said, sorry, mate, you’re out of luck. That’s just too much.”

“You had me rummage around in your mind,” recalled Harry. “That’s not that different.”

“Yes, except for the huge, enormous difference that it was you, not Snape,” said Ron. “That’s what makes what you did so impressive. Sometimes it bothered me that there was this big thing that you three knew and I didn’t, but now, I think I’m just as glad I didn’t know. Would’ve got too worked up on your behalf, both of you. Funny, I’ve always given you two a hard time about doing stuff. Hard to resist, you know, it’s such a cliché, my younger sister and my best mate. But after this, somehow I don’t think I have it in me anymore.”

“Oh, that’d be a shame,” grinned Ginny. “It’s always so fun to attack Harry and get a reaction out of you. It’s like, two good things at once.”

“Well, I suppose I could try,” conceded Ron.

“That’s the spirit,” said Ginny. She leaned over to Harry, took his face in her hands, and started kissing him. Ron said nothing for a few seconds, then with obvious false enthusiasm, said, “All right, Ginny! Go for it!”

Ginny and Harry fell out of the kiss as they started laughing, as did the other three. “Oh, my, that just doesn’t sound right,” chuckled Hermione.

“I appreciate the effort, Ron,” smiled Ginny. Leaning against Harry’s chest and putting her arms around him, she exhaled in satisfaction. “Well, at least that part of it’s over. No more having to think about it, that any particular thing could be viewed.”

Harry agreed to himself that it would be a relief, but he didn’t want to think about the circumstances under which it had happened. “It never occurred to me that there would be a good point about Snape getting blown. I just thought of something... I wonder what would have happened if he’d got blown, but there wasn’t this possibility that I could change him back?”

“That would have been bad,” agreed Hermione. “The problem is, you’re the one who helped him, and he needed to be on his best behavior around you, but he blamed you for his getting exposed, and was really mad at you. It would’ve been very hard for him to calm down enough about that for you to help him.”

Harry nodded, indicating that that had been what he’d been thinking. “I just hope I can do this thing, now.”

“The important thing to remember,” said Hermione earnestly, “is that it’s not your fault if something goes wrong. He’s been living on borrowed time for a long time now, and it probably wasn’t going to be that long before Voldemort was defeated anyway, and he’d be in the same position. This only changes the timing a bit. I don’t want you thinking, if this doesn’t go well... you’ve done a lot for him, you’ve done all you could.”

“I suppose so,” he said, though he found it hard to accept the idea that he shouldn’t blame himself if something went wrong. Still holding onto Ginny, he found himself thinking about what Snape had said about Grindelwald. Is it really the same thing? he asked himself. The fact is, if I’d thought about using the wand to Disapparate, Voldemort would be in custody now, or dead, and this would all be over. How many more people are going to die because I didn’t think of the right thing to do at the right time? I should have thought about—

“Harry!” snapped Hermione, in an accusatory tone. Harry blinked, wondering what he’d done. “Don’t you dare think that! Snape was just trying to hurt you because he was mad at you. Albus had Grindelwald in his power; I don’t think it’s fair to say that you ever did with Voldemort. You can always look back at a situation and think you could have done something differently. Would you have wanted me to blame myself for what I did to Skeeter, that almost messed up your life pretty badly?”

Harry finally understood. “Fawkes,” he said, annoyed, though it was hard for him to ever be truly annoyed at Fawkes.

To the others, Hermione explained, “Harry was thinking that Snape was right, that it was his fault Voldemort got away. Fawkes sent it to me. I think he’s afraid that Harry’s going to start counting the bodies from now on, blaming himself for them, and hopes I, or we, can stop him. Harry, you just can’t think like that, you can’t. It wasn’t Albus’s fault that Grindelwald got away; things just happen. And I think this one happened for a reason. Honestly, I think you were right, that this is the only way to really kill Voldemort, so he’s truly dead. And if you had done what you wish you had done, you wouldn’t have had a chance to find this out. Things happen, Harry. It’s pointless to blame yourself, you did the best you could.”

“You blamed yourself, this summer,” he reluctantly pointed out.

“Exactly, so I know what I’m talking about,” she retorted. A part of Harry understood that she was right; he knew most people wouldn’t have done as much as he had. He chuckled to himself. “What?” asked Hermione.

“I just thought, I’d better not spend too much time blaming myself, or Fawkes is going to keep telling you, and you’ll be bothering me all the time,” said Harry.

“Yes, that’s probably why he told me,” she agreed humorously. “He doesn’t want you blaming yourself, because he feels it, too. Not that he’d mind if it was justified, but this isn’t. Even though he doesn’t see the situation like we do, I’m pretty sure that on some level, he knows that.”

“Maybe,” he said.

“And that would be,” she pressed him, “because on some level, you know that.”

Harry thought, but didn’t answer; his only reaction was to hold Ginny more tightly. He wondered if he could accept what Hermione was saying. He thought she was right, that on some level, he knew that he shouldn’t blame himself; he had been in an extremely stressful situation, and he’d done his best. He had eventually learned not to blame himself for Hogsmeade; he knew this was different, but it was similar

in a way. He wondered how many historical figures suffered from regrets or second thoughts. Probably a lot, he told himself.

Harry glanced up in surprise as the Pensieve floated into the room; a quick glance around told him that Hermione had Summoned it from his office. He let go of Ginny as she sat up straight. “You know how I’ve always put a memory in this when we’ve practiced Legilimens, since summer,” said Hermione. She put a memory into the Pensieve, then gestured to it. “We think you should see it. Go ahead.”

Startled, Harry gaped in amazement. “But isn’t that a memory of...”

Hermione looked greatly amused at what she knew he was thinking. Deadpan, Neville said, “Yes, Harry, that’s right. We wanted to show you a memory of us having sex. We thought you should see how it was done properly.”

Ron, Pansy, and Ginny burst out laughing, then after a second, so did Hermione. Neville didn’t smile until Harry gave him a ‘very funny’ look. “Well,” said Ginny, still laughing, “If I’m any judge—”

“Please,” said Ron, interrupting his own laughter, “whatever you do, please don’t finish that sentence.”

“I thought you were going to change how you were about that,” protested Ginny with feigned disappointment.

“You’re right, I forgot,” said Ron. Again sounding very insincere, he said, “What I meant to say is, please tell us in great detail about Harry’s capabilities in that area. We all really want to know.”

“Well, if you insist,” said Ginny agreeably. “First of all,—”

Harry playfully reached over and covered Ginny’s mouth with his hand. To Neville and Hermione, he protested, “Come on, you can hardly blame me for thinking that.”

“If it were that, well, let’s just say I’d have had to put more than that into the Pensieve every time,” said a still-amused Hermione. “No, it’s a bit more serious than that. What you’re about to see is from near the end of the Apparation crisis,

during the shift when you caught Malfoy. When Neville and I had our big talk after getting the Skeeter letters.”

Harry’s eyebrows went up; whatever it was, he knew, it was bound to be very personal. He thought to ask, why this but not any other memory, but he realized that question would probably be answered as he viewed it. As he took his hand off Ginny’s mouth and put it in the Pensieve, he heard her say, “Now, as I was about to say...”

He was suddenly in Neville’s Auror quarters. Neville and Hermione both looked very emotional; he would have known they were having an important conversation even if he hadn’t already been told. Hermione looked as though she had cried recently.

Neville spoke first. “It’s not that I don’t believe you. It’s just that... you say you can’t tell me why you did it, because of what I’m not supposed to know. I just don’t know how I can accept that... I mean, the whole problem is that you violated my trust. How can I just say, well, I trust you that it was for a good reason? If I’m going to accept that, I really need to know why.”

Hermione looked like she might cry again. “I don’t know what to tell you, Neville. You know I’m not supposed to tell anyone this, you know it’s for a good reason. What can I say, more than that?”

“You need to trust me,” he replied earnestly. “Tell me what it is. Whatever it is, nobody else will know that I know. But I have to know.”

“It sounds like you’re saying you can’t trust me unless I tell you this,” she said. He glanced down, then looked her in the eye, saying nothing. She sighed. “I guess I can’t blame you, and it’s not as though I should be telling you what you should and shouldn’t think.” She paused for a short time, thinking. Finally, she said, “It’s ironic, I have to violate Harry’s trust to get yours back.”

“That’s not fair,” protested Neville. “I never asked you to—”

“I know, I know,” she said sadly. “This is all my fault, I’m not saying it’s not.”

“Harry will understand,” said Neville. “Just explain it to him.”

“I wish I could explain it to him, it would make me feel better,” she said ruefully. “If I could explain it to him, I could ask his permission, and he’d give it. Of course, it’s not totally his to give, but never mind that for now. Okay, here it is...”

The scene shifted; Neville and Hermione had barely moved, but clearly Hermione had edited the memory so that Harry would be spared the explanation she gave Neville. After it resumed, Neville looked stunned, which didn’t surprise Harry at all. “That’s got to be the weirdest thing I’ve ever heard,” said Neville. “Now I understand perfectly, of course. It was a sweet gesture, and I would have approved of it, if I’d known the situation.”

“I knew you would,” she said. “That was part of what helped me decide to do it, even though I couldn’t tell you, or would have to give you not enough information if I did tell you. It just never occurred to me how it would look to you if you ever found out...”

“Because you didn’t think I would find out,” he finished. “She’s just so nasty, she knew just how to make it look the worst.”

She nodded. “As with the other things, though, I didn’t help. I should have told you everything I could have, you would have trusted me then. If I lost your trust, I deserved to.” There was a short silence; Harry wondered whether Neville was just thinking, or was being conspicuously silent. Hermione spoke again, saying, “Now, of course, I’ll have to put a memory, this one, into the Pensieve every time before Harry and I practice Legilimency. Fortunately, he’ll just think it’s something sexual, and so will Snape if he sees it. The important thing for both of us to remember is that we can’t talk about it or refer to it from here on out, even when we’re alone. There’s only a tiny chance that Harry would see anything, but he can’t hide anything from Snape, and if Snape saw it... well, it would be bad. He’d blame Harry, it might even jeopardize their situation. We have to be careful.”

Neville nodded. "I understand. Poor Harry, I feel so bad for him. I mean, with Snape? How in the world is he managing that?"

"It hasn't been that long, but he's doing all right, apparently," she said, after which the memory reset to the beginning.

Harry exited the Pensieve to see Hermione looking at him apprehensively. She opened her mouth to speak, but Ron beat her to it. "Wow, that was some amazing stuff you told us, Ginny."

Harry rolled his eyes. "If she really had, you'd be long gone," he said.

"You've got to get up pretty early to fool Harry," joked Pansy.

"Not really... usually, you can sleep in till noon," responded Ron.

Hermione waited to make sure they were finished. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"I understand," he said somberly. "You did it right, I'll say that. I never had any idea, which was the point. And at least Neville knew not to tell me anything he didn't want Snape knowing."

"There were times when I wished I could have told Ron and Pansy the same thing," agreed Hermione. "Especially when that thing with Blaise happened. She wouldn't have come to you if she'd known. Oh, that reminds me, I can lift the Memory Charm now!"

"Oh, good, I've been wondering what's behind that," he said. "Now okay?"

She nodded, and cast Legilimens on him. She pointed him to the Charm, and he unlocked it quickly; the memories came flooding back. Seeing his look of recognition, Pansy said, "It was a shame that you couldn't remember that. Helen and Sylvia's 100's came two days after that, and we—the second years and I—are sure that meeting had a lot to do with it, with their scores in general. You deserved to enjoy that, but you couldn't."

"Well, I can now," he said, feeling very satisfied. "Of course—"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door; Hermione waved it open to reveal Hugo. "Hugo, I should've known," said Harry, gesturing him to a spot on the

floor. “I’m always so preoccupied after these things happen that I forget you’re bound to show up.”

“Understandable,” said Hugo as he sat between Harry and Hermione. “How’s the hand?”

“I forget I shouldn’t touch things, and the static reminds me,” he said. “Pretty good, though. A lot better than before, for sure.”

“I saw Kingsley’s memory of your hand, it looked really nasty,” agreed Hugo. “Snape had a lot of nerve, acting like that should be no impediment to your picking up a wand. It’d damn well be an impediment to most people, including me.”

“Is that your way of asking if he feels bad about not picking it up?” asked Hermione, her expression neutral. Harry thought there was a slight edge to her tone, but had no idea why.

Sensing Harry’s puzzlement, Hugo explained. “I’ve aroused Hermione’s protective instincts. She knows my question will cause you to think about that, which obviously she doesn’t want you doing. The fact is, Hermione, that it wasn’t deliberate, but it might have been... unconsciously deliberate. I do have this journalistic habit of asking questions or making comments in a way that doesn’t directly address a sensitive subject, but will likely remind the person of it; I can then get a read on how they feel about it, and whether they’d be receptive to talking about it. I wasn’t trying to do that here—Harry tends to answer anything I ask—but it may be from that habit. So I’m sorry, to both of you, since I sense Harry’s less bothered than you are.”

“You know, Hermione, that I am going to have to think about this,” pointed out Harry. “It would be impossible for me not to, and you can’t go bothering me every time the phoenixes tell you I’m thinking about it. If I’m obsessing, then okay, bother me. But I’ve barely had a chance to think about it yet.”

“I can just see you doing it,” she replied unhappily. “But yes, I suppose you do at least have to think about it. So, Hugo, I gather you’ve seen Kingsley’s memory of the meeting we had.”

“Yes, so now I finally understand what the thing with Snape is. I knew it was something unusual; not only wouldn’t he talk to me, he wouldn’t allow me in his presence, ever. I see why, now. Obviously, I’m deeply impressed at what you did for him, what Dumbledore did. And I understand you’re worried about tomorrow, but Harry, I could see enough in the memory to know that he really couldn’t wait longer.”

“I know,” said Harry heavily. “This was his worst fear, that he would stop being useful. Well, I guess I’ll just do my best, and hope it ends up all right. Anyway, Hugo, what’s going to be made public?”

“A lot of it will, I’ll just tell you what won’t be. Nothing about him pulling information from you, or anything to do with how you plan to beat him. Nothing about the details of how you got away, such as that ring; he’s probably still wondering about that. If he’s not still screaming, that is. Nothing suggesting that there was anything you could have done but didn’t do. If you’re going to wrestle with demons, at least you get to do it privately,” said Hugo sympathetically. “Pretty much everything else will be public.”

“Even the hand?” asked Ron, amazed.

“It was decided that it was too good to pass up, from a morale point of view,” explained Hugo. “You accomplished something big, Harry, but the biggest thing is something they can’t make public. The hand will be very compelling, both narratively and photographically—”

“They’re going to run a picture of it? Isn’t that going to be a little...” wondered Harry.

“It’ll be one of those things where you have to hold your wand over it to see it,” Hugo assured him, “and there’ll be a big warning of what it is. Don’t worry, the bracelet will be in the picture also, and the caption will explain that you did it to get the bracelet. Of course, most people will just be happy that you took a chunk out of him, they won’t care why. Harry, emotions are running high right now, and it’s going to be that much more when people find out about the deaths of five

Aurors. I'm starting to hear rumblings, both within the Ministry, and outside of it, about it not being a bad idea to just kill any Death Eaters we capture. After a trial, of course. Partly because they might escape and kill again, and partly... as revenge."

Harry chuckled humorlessly. "I'm sure Snape would approve."

"No doubt," agreed Hugo. "He killed Skeeter, didn't he?" he asked, his tone making it more a statement than a question. Harry's expression clearly having told him he was correct, Hugo continued, "I suspected it back then, to tell you the truth. Well, would you mind if I looked at your memory of it, from when you were taken until you escaped?"

Harry shrugged. "You can, but it's going to be pretty boring; most of it is just me doing Legilimens, which is why I didn't show it to the others."

"That's okay, I can skip forward if I want." Harry put the memory in, and Hugo entered the Pensieve.

Looking slightly embarrassed, Ron said, "I kind of want to see it too, but it would be for... definitely the wrong reasons. I wouldn't mind seeing you taking his hand off, or that scream you said he did at the end."

"I want to also," said Neville, "and it would be for the wrong reasons, but I don't care. I know, Harry, I know all about... that word I can't pronounce—"

"Schadenfreude," supplied Hermione.

"Yes, that one. I know I shouldn't go out of my way to enjoy it, but I do want to see it, just once. Maybe it's like the Malfoy thing. He's caused a lot of suffering, and there's something good about seeing what happened, and it's not necessarily... that word."

"I think I know what Neville means," said Hermione. "It's kind of what Hugo was just mentioning, about why they're putting the picture of the hand in the paper. It's good for morale, you were able to inflict a pretty bad injury on him. Nobody's ever been able to do that, except you, first as a baby and then now. Hearing about it is one thing, seeing it is another."

Harry found that he could understand that, though he had no desire to see it again, much less see it and enjoy it. “Okay, after Hugo gets out, I’ll make an edited version, and you can see that. It won’t take long.” To his surprise, Hugo exited the Pensieve a minute later, after which he edited the memory and put it back in. All five of his friends and Hugo watched it.

Ginny moved over to Harry and hugged him again. “I think Hugo was right, Snape does have his nerve to expect that of you, to pick up a burning-hot wand as if it were nothing. I hate to see you in that kind of pain, especially the second time.”

“As you know, he’s dealt with much, much worse than that,” he reminded her. She reluctantly nodded, but wore an expression of, ‘but, still...’

“I had a question, Harry,” said Hugo. “Well, I could ask as part of the interview, but I thought of it now, so... after you woke up, you grabbed his wand, took off his hand, then did the Imperius Charm. The wand burns when you use the person’s wand against him, but you didn’t seem to be in pain until you did the Imperius Charm. Do you have any idea why?”

Surprised, Harry shook his head. “It seems like I should have been right away, doesn’t it.”

Hugo nodded. “I was surprised that you didn’t activate the wand’s defense by taking off his hand, then drop it reflexively before you could do the Charm.”

“Me, too, now that you mention it. I think I sort of did it in one motion, so maybe the curse on the wand took just long enough to activate that I was able to get the Charm in before I felt it.”

Hugo raised his eyebrows. “That would be strange, most spells don’t have that kind of delay, even for a half a second. Anyway, would you mind doing the interview now, or were you guys in the middle of something?”

“I think they were just making fun of me, so no, nothing special,” joked Harry. “Now’s okay.”

* * * * *

Harry rolled over in bed after finishing his Occlumency exercises. Do I really even need to do these any more? he asked himself. I don't think he's going to be coming after me the way he did before. Better safe than sorry, I guess. Harry wondered whether he could actually go after Voldemort from a distance as Voldemort had him. It was an interesting question, but he knew he would never try.

He started playing the day's events over in his mind, starting with Blaise giving him the warning in his class. Was Snape right, he wondered, should he not have gone? It hadn't occurred to him during the day to ask Ginny what she thought, though he knew she would probably have said that he would do what he would do anyway, so her opinion didn't really matter. He knew her emotional reaction would be that he should never go into danger deliberately.

Five Aurors dead, he thought despondently. Looks like Kingsley was wrong about that jailbreak not being such a bad thing. Maybe they're not Death Eaters, but they know the Killing Curse, and that's all Voldemort needed. There aren't enough free, Cleansed Death Eaters to overwhelm six Aurors like that. No, I made the right decision by going. I couldn't save them, but if things had gone differently, I might have been able to. Yes, Albus warned me it was a trap, but I just should have reacted better, should have remembered that Death Eaters could have taken hair from Neville and Hermione when they had them in July. I had to go. Maybe Voldemort knew that, but I still had to go. Snape only yelled at me because it got him blown, but he knows me, he knew I had to do it.

Not having Apparated Voldemort out of the plane when he had the chance was another matter, however. No matter how much Bright, Ginny, Hugo, or anyone else said that it was understandable that he didn't think to use the wand, he knew better. He knew that if he'd thought of it, he would've done it. He took small comfort in the thought that his mistake would cost fewer lives than Dumbledore's had, since Voldemort tended to kill fewer people personally. He wasn't sure whether

he should hold himself personally responsible for anyone Death Eaters killed from that point on, since they could continue killing anyway, even if Voldemort was killed. They just liked to kill, Harry knew. Then he remembered Dumbledore once reminding him that he was responsible only for his own actions, not those of others. At the same time, Dumbledore hadn't applied that to himself. He knew it, but he couldn't internalize it. Harry wondered whether he would do any better, or whether it was better not to do it at all. Perhaps it was immoral not to hold himself responsible in that kind of situation.

Variations on those thoughts rolled around in his head for the next half hour. He didn't reach any conclusions, of course; he doubted he ever would. He imagined Voldemort's next victim, a death he could have stopped if he'd thought correctly. He felt as though there were a lead weight in his stomach, that he had condemned some unknown person to death. He wanted to run, to do anything he could to escape the feeling. Why didn't I think of it, he asked himself for the tenth time. What's wrong with me, why don't I think as well as other people. Hermione would have thought of it, probably a lot of other people would have, too. But not me, I don't see what's in front of my face.

Suddenly an image popped into his head, along with a feeling. The image was of Hermione standing at the podium in the Great Hall last November; Harry recalled that she was saying that he was someone for whom others could risk their lives for without hesitation. The feeling was one of compassion and acceptance. He knew that Hermione must have known what he'd been thinking, and sent him what he'd just felt. She was communicating in a way very different from words, but he knew what she was trying to say: We all have our strengths, and leadership is yours. You've done more than almost anyone could have done, you've accomplished so much. You're not alone.

Without stopping to think, he sent a response: an image of himself in bed in the dark, eyes wide open. The feeling he sent was part of what he'd been feeling in the past half hour: fear of having allowed harm to come to others, and

loneliness, even though he knew he was loved. I feel alone, he communicated. I don't want to feel like this, but I can't help it. All this responsibility, just on me.

You're not alone, we're all with you, she sent back with her feelings. Even if we're asleep, we're always with you. Think of us, imagine what we're thinking, and you'll realize it's true. You'll understand you're not alone.

I'm scared, he sent, the thought that he was communicating things he would never say verbally flashing through his mind for a second. Scared of what might happen tomorrow with Snape, scared of who might die next, more scared than you knew I was. People wouldn't have confidence in me if they knew how scared I was.

This is a hard night, today was a hard day, she said without words. We all get scared, it's all right. I'm here with you, the others would be if they could. Think about Ginny, think about us, focus on love. I'll be with you until you fall asleep, then Albus will be. You're never alone. I/we love you.

A duet of phoenix song suddenly began; he glanced up in the darkness to see Fawkes and Flora at the end of his bed. He sent out a feeling of deep gratitude, to Hermione and to the phoenixes. He focused on the song, and on the feelings of love Hermione continued sending him. Sooner than he would have thought possible, he was asleep.

* * * * *

The next thing he knew, he was standing next to a stream. "Hermione is right, you know," said Dumbledore, approaching him. "You are never truly alone, you are always loved."

"I guess sometimes I just need to be reminded of that," said Harry as he accepted Dumbledore's hug. They sat next to the stream.

"As do we all," agreed Dumbledore. "I am simply fortunate that here, I can be reminded so easily."

Harry thought for a minute about what he wanted to say, even though he knew Dumbledore was seeing his thoughts. “There’s no way I can make myself feel better about this, is there?”

Dumbledore gave a small nod. “You can listen to the people who care about you. What they tell you is the truth. No, they cannot truly know how you feel, since they are not you. But they can know well enough to understand much of what you are going through; you should not dismiss them simply because they cannot know exactly.”

“But you suffered so much, after Grindelwald got away.”

“That does not mean you have to,” Dumbledore pointed out reasonably. “Much of what I suffered was unnecessary. I was living in a foreign country; I was rather isolated. Of course I could Apparate back to England at any time, and occasionally I did. But I did not talk to people as much as I should have, nor did I open up to those I did talk to as much as I should have. I felt I had to suffer alone; of course, I realized much later that I was very wrong. You are surrounded by people who love you and want to help you, both physically and emotionally. Any isolation you feel is simply that of your own choosing.”

Harry thought for a minute, then said, “But I do have to suffer for what I didn’t do, I can’t avoid that.”

Dumbledore gently shook his head. “No, you do not have to suffer, difficult as that may be to accept. You could choose to learn from what has happened, accept that you cannot change it, and focus on the here and now. I am not saying that it is easy, just that it is possible. Just because I could not manage it does not mean that you could not.”

“How can I not suffer from this?” asked Harry plaintively.

“Unhelpful as the answer may sound, simply by choosing not to,” replied Dumbledore. “Very much of what we experience is by choice, even things that we seem to have little control over. Everything that happens in your mind happens by

your choice. We are simply not accustomed to exercising conscious control over those choices.”

“Did you?” asked Harry, curious.

“To an extent, a greater extent that I believe most people manage,” admitted Dumbledore. “For example, I was never able to completely absolve myself of blame for such things as what happened to you yesterday, but I was eventually able to ‘let it go’ much more quickly than I otherwise would have, to not dwell on it. There is no reason you cannot do the same.”

“Can you give me any advice on how to do it?”

“The most important advice I can give is that you believe that it is possible,” said Dumbledore. “I have told you how important thoughts are. You would be amazed at what you can do if you simply believe that you can.”

“I want to believe it,” said Harry, who felt that he was a certain distance away from actually doing so. “So, will believing I can do it help me with what I’m going to try with Professor Snape tomorrow?”

“Of course, it is most helpful to avoid using words like ‘try,’” advised Dumbledore, as the other Snape appeared. “But, yes, it will indeed help.”

Harry stood and embraced Snape. “We may not do this again,” said Snape humorously. “Even as a whole entity, I was never in the habit of hugging.”

“Maybe if I succeed, he, or you, will feel differently,” suggested Harry.

“It is not impossible,” agreed Snape. “We have no way to know how I will respond when I am successfully reunited with my other half.”

“Note that he uses the phrase ‘when,’ not ‘if,’ said Dumbledore with a smile.

“I did notice that,” replied Harry, smiling as well. “Is that confidence, or just wanting to think positively?”

“Both,” replied Snape. “I cannot think of anyone I would rather have doing this than you. Not because you are an expert in the procedure—who could be?—but because you will act out of love. No one could ask for more than that.”

I hope that’s enough, thought Harry. “How is he doing?”

“He is struggling, though he is doing better than he was when you saw him last. He has had some time to recover from the shock of losing the ability to be a spy, but his emotional state is still precarious. Right now, the only thing that keeps him going is the knowledge that it will soon be over for him. I would recommend that you begin as soon as you feel comfortable. He has not slept tonight, nor will he. Minerva is staying up with him, keeping him company.”

“That’s very good of her,” said Harry, impressed. “I have a feeling he’s not making it easy for her.”

“Indeed not,” agreed Snape. “He insists that he does not need her company, but they both know that is not true. She has assured him that she will speak to you after breakfast to find out when you will be ready.”

Harry sighed. “I don’t think I’m really going to be ready, but I know what you mean. I’ll do my best. Is there anything you can tell me that will help?”

Snape shook his head. “You know more about the procedure for the Cleansing by having viewed it than I do, having undergone it. The pain was so intense, I could not even begin to think about how it was being done, just about enduring it. Just so you are prepared, what you will do will probably cause intense... discomfort. He said that it was not exactly pain when you did the Imperius Charm on him; this will probably be quite similar. You should try not to be overly disturbed by this; it is inevitable.

“I should say something about the aftermath, however. You should not have any particular expectations of his behavior afterwards; if he, or we, act much like he used to, it will not mean that you failed, or that something went wrong. His manner after the Cleansing was not so different from his manner before it. Before, he had the potential for pleasant emotions; it was simply very rarely that he experienced them. There is just no way to predict how he, we, will behave once this is done.”

“I understand,” said Harry. “I guess I didn’t expect him to suddenly run around grinning all the time anyway. No one’s ever had done to them what he’s about to, so I guess we’ll all find out. Oh, one thing I wondered about: will he, or

the both of you, will you remember, I mean, will you keep your memories of being here?”

“I cannot be sure, but I think it highly likely that I will not,” said Snape. “I will remember what I have seen in your memories, of course.”

Harry nodded. “I guess there’s not that much more to say, then. But I do want to say that I’ll miss you being here. I’ve appreciated all your help.”

Snape smiled. “It’s definitely the other way around. You have done so much, sacrificed so much, to help us... I don’t know whether we, reunited, will be able to convey our appreciation for all you have done, so I will now. I see that you are thinking that you did it for the Order, which is true, but you did it for me as well. Thank you very much.”

Harry glanced down, slightly embarrassed. “You’re welcome.” Turning to Dumbledore, he asked, “I can’t help but wonder, Albus... is Voldemort still screaming?”

“I am pleased that you take no pleasure from the prospect,” said Dumbledore. “No, but shortly after he returned to them, he was sedated by his Death Eaters. He is now conscious and under heavy sedation; he is not screaming, but is in very serious discomfort.”

“I assume he knows what I did,” said Harry. “After all, it was his thought that gave me the idea.”

Dumbledore nodded. “He is barely capable of coherent thought or speech, but yes, he knows. He is still in denial about the nature of what you do, however. He thinks that you have stumbled onto a source of power, which you mistakenly identify as love, but which he is particularly vulnerable to. He perceives what you have done as... roughly, burning a hole in his psyche, or consciousness, whichever you like. We would perceive it as a spot of light, or a spot from which love has the potential to grow. To him love does not exist, so he sees it as a hole. It burns him, as it were; it causes him intense pain because it cannot be reconciled with the rest of him, but it also cannot be gotten rid of easily. Severus was likely correct when he

suggested that Voldemort would find a way to deal with it in time, but it is a very positive sign. It strongly suggests that what you intend to do to him will be effective.”

“Do you think that Hermione and I might be right, that this may be the only way to truly kill him?”

“It may be,” agreed Dumbledore. “Of course, I do not know that any more than you do. I sense that you hope that is the case; if it is, you feel you need not blame yourself for what happened today. I say again, of course, that you need not blame yourself in any case.”

“I hope that I can not blame myself, at some point,” said Harry ruefully. “That would be nice, and I do see your point, it’s just that... well, I don’t need to explain, you know how it is for me.”

“Only too well,” said Dumbledore gravely. “You will stop blaming yourself at some point, as I did. It is simply a question of when.” He paused, then added, “We should stop for tonight. You fell asleep later than usual, and you will want to be at full alertness tomorrow.” Harry nodded, and was asleep again.

* * * * *

Harry awoke to find that he was the only one in his dormitory. A look at his clock told him that it was seven-thirty, a little later than he usually got up. Winter vacation had technically begun, so he had no official commitments, and he was glad to get the extra sleep.

He changed into his day clothes and left the dormitory. Heading to the portrait hole, he was intercepted by Andrea Creevey. “Professor!”

He looked over to see that she had run over from where she had been sitting with the other second year girls, huddled around a copy of the Prophet. “Hi, Andrea. You have the paper already?”

“You got up kind of late,” she noted. He took a few steps over to look at the paper over the girls’ shoulders as they looked up and greeted him. “I can’t believe you...” Andrea held her wrist with her hand.

“Good on you, I say,” said Seamus, sitting nearby with Dean. “But why not his neck while you were at it?”

Bet that’s not the first time I get asked that, he thought. “The energy of love doesn’t like violence,” he said. “I have to be concerned that if I try to kill him and fail, I could lose the ability to use it. You remember my talk last week about Dumbledore and Grindelwald.”

“But you took off his hand,” Seamus pointed out. “That’s kind of violent. Could you have done, say, a whole arm, or a leg?”

A few of the girls made ‘ewww’ noises. “It has to be for a good reason, it can’t just be violence for the sake of it,” explained Harry. “It’s hard to explain, but let’s just say that if I was in a frame of mind where I could take off his arms and legs for no good reason except that he’s Voldemort, it would be a frame of mind where I couldn’t use the energy of love.” Echoing Kingsley’s comment from yesterday, he added, “It gives you a lot of power, but there’s kind of a price—a feeling that violence is just unacceptable. I know that may be hard for people to understand, but I don’t mind it. I’m not going to beat Voldemort with violence. I just had to get that bracelet off him.”

“And the wand was burning hot,” pointed out one of the girls. “He couldn’t have used it like that anyway. Didn’t you see the picture?”

“Yeah, that did look nasty,” acknowledged Seamus, as Harry gave the girl an inquiring look. She turned to another page of the Prophet, and he saw a few pictures which Hugo had obviously gotten as images from Kingsley’s memory. One was of him and Bright, Bright’s hand extended, Harry holding up his to show why he couldn’t shake Bright’s hand. There was a small image of a magnifying glass hovering over his hand, indicating that holding the wand over the spot would magnify that part of the picture. Another picture was a close-up of his head and

shoulders, dirty and bloodied, from soon after he had returned. Below the picture was a quote: 'I Didn't Escape Him, He Escaped Me.' Harry remembered having said it, but somehow it seemed different as a picture caption, more like boasting than he'd intended for it to sound.

"So, what's the plan for vacation?" asked Seamus with a grin. "Go finish him off?"

"I would, if I knew where to find him," he replied grimly.

Seamus raised his eyebrows, evidently not having expected that answer.

"You really aren't afraid of him, are you?"

"No," Harry replied quietly. More to himself than to the others, he added, "No, right now, he's afraid of me." He left, and headed out to get breakfast.

As he exited the portrait hole, he got an impression from Hermione, via Fawkes. Don't say anything to anyone about last night, she sent. He got an image of Ginny, and an emotional impression of being upset.

He wanted to send back the question, do you mean she is upset, or that she might be upset, but he wasn't sure what to send to clarify it. He realized that communicating with a human through a phoenix was quite different from communicating with a phoenix. He would have no need to convey the abstract idea of future or past to Fawkes; he wondered if he and Hermione should invent some visual shorthand for concepts that phoenixes wouldn't use. Having an idea but wanting to understand her thinking, he sent back, why?

She'd like to do what I did, but she can't, not the same way, sent Hermione. Remember, she's sensitive about this. We should talk about this privately before you say anything to her.

We didn't do anything wrong, he sent. I'm so grateful for what you did, it really helped.

I know, and I'm glad, she replied as he neared the Great Hall. No, it's not wrong, but it's better to be careful. We don't want Ginny's feelings to get hurt if we can avoid it. Trust me, and talk to me privately as soon as you can.

Uneasy, he entered the Hall. He had some idea of why there could be a problem, but wasn't sure why it should be such a big thing. Heading to his usual spot, he sat; all his friends were already there, and most had apparently already finished their food. "I think that's about as late as you can get up and still get food," remarked Ron. "Of course, you're a teacher, so you could always get house-elves to deliver to your quarters. Did you need extra sleep from talking to Dumbledore too long?"

He shook his head. "Just had some trouble sleeping." He felt oddly guilty, even though he would have given the same answer if Hermione hadn't talked to him the night before.

Ginny gave him a sad look, and reached her hand across the table. "You know you can always talk to me, even if you think I might be asleep. My hand might not wake me up, but the pendant probably would." He took her hand and nodded, but said nothing.

"Well, Harry, there's already fallout from yesterday," said Hermione, handing him her copy of the Prophet. As he opened it, another copy fell on top of it. "Nice timing," he said, in the direction of the owl that dropped it.

"Well, he's probably been waiting for a half hour for you to show, so he could drop it and be on his way," pointed out Neville reasonably.

Harry shrugged. "Sorry," he called out facetiously to the departing owl, then opened the paper, handing Hermione back hers. There were two main front-page articles: one about Harry's abduction, and one about the Aurors being killed. Looking at the bottom of the page, he found the one Hermione was referring to, titled, 'Calls Grow In Ministry For Summary Execution Of Death Eaters In Custody.' Harry looked up at Hermione and raised his eyebrows; she gave him a small shrug and gestured for him to read.

In the wake of yesterday's Death Eater attacks on the Aurors and Harry Potter (see articles above) in which five Aurors died, wizards and

witches both in and out of the Ministry started speaking out in favor of a temporary re-instituting of capital punishment, to be meted out to those involved in Death Eater attacks.

The Ministry itself has taken no position on the matter as yet, but sources inside the Ministry say that they are looking at the idea favorably. An Undersecretary who requested anonymity was quoted as saying, “I don’t like it especially; it isn’t what any of us would really prefer. But enough is enough. We have to protect people, to protect our citizens. How many have died at the hands of escaped Death Eaters? If they’re dead, they won’t kill any more. This is the only thing these people understand.”

There are, of course, plenty who believe that even a temporary return to capital punishment is going too far. “Yes, it’s a dire situation,” agreed a high Ministry official. “But the state killing people is not the answer; we must simply do a better job of holding on to those we have. We value life, and for us to kill in cold blood sends the wrong message to our children: that any action can be justified in the right circumstances. Some things are simply wrong.”

All agree that emotions are running high in the wizarding world in recent days. Over the past week and a half, twenty-five wizards have died, and many more would have but for Professor Potter and those who have learned to use his Killing Curse shield. Over the past year and two months, since last year’s attack on the village of Hogsmeade, thirty-two Death Eaters in Ministry custody have escaped. A jail to replace Azkaban is in the early stages of construction, in high secrecy, but it will not be completed for some time—time enough, many fear, for those in custody now to be freed yet again, to kill yet again.

Conversations last night with residents of Hogsmeade and those shopping in Diagon Alley suggest that significant support exists for such measures. Three years ago, public opinion was firmly against capital punishment. But as the quote above from the Ministry Undersecretary suggests, many who do not approve of capital punishment in principle may be willing to support it in this particular situation. Furthermore, twenty-two were captured in yesterday’s attack on the Aurors, putting further strain on the Ministry’s ability to guard dangerous prisoners.

Minister of Magic Rudolphus Bright has not yet spoken publicly on this matter, and was unavailable for comment yesterday after spending the afternoon meeting with the Aurors and Professor Potter, then with Ministry officials well into the evening.

“Wow, this has gotten really bad,” said Harry upon finishing the article. “I didn’t realize people were this ready to do this.”

“You can see the appeal, though,” pointed out Hermione. “It would solve one problem on a practical level—you don’t have to keep prisoners if you’ve killed them all—and nobody can say they don’t deserve it. It’s also more palatable if we say it’s ‘temporary.’ I mean, it probably would be, but they’re still talking about killing people. From a moral point of view, obviously, it doesn’t really matter whether it’s ‘temporary’ or not, but it sounds better.”

Harry grunted in agreement. “Yes, it’s temporary until there’s no one left to kill. After that, they’ll stop.”

“I think they mean, temporary until Voldemort is defeated,” suggested Ron. “Until then, any Death Eater that gets captured, that’s it. You know, Harry,” he said, looking at Harry solemnly, “I can’t say I think this is a totally bad idea. Like that Undersecretary bloke said, I don’t like it. But however many they have right now could get out at any time, and they’d kill again, we know that for sure.”

“Obviously, we’ve already discussed this a bit,” said Hermione. “I understand what Ron says, but I just can’t get myself to agree to have a part in killing people, no matter how much they deserve it. It’s a moral issue, and it shouldn’t have anything to do with the practical aspects of our situation.”

“I don’t think you can separate them,” responded Ron. “It seems more morally wrong to me, to let innocent people die to protect the lives of Death Eaters—”

“It’s to protect a principle, Ron, not the Death Eaters’ lives,” snapped Hermione. “If you say it that way, you make it sound like anyone who opposes this

is pro-Death Eater. That's how politicians talk when they want to make their opponents look bad. I've read enough political stuff by now, I know how it works."

"Well, I didn't mean that, obviously," conceded Ron. "You know what I meant."

"I assume, Harry, you're still not in favor of this, right?" asked Hermione.

He grimaced slightly. "I do see the point, and... I hadn't thought about capital punishment much before this year, but whenever I do now, I think of Sirius. If they'd had capital punishment then, I would never have met him."

"Well, obviously, we'd have to be really careful," said Ron.

"You mean, only kill the guilty ones?" responded Hermione sardonically. "It doesn't work that way. People make mistakes; if you have capital punishment, innocent people will eventually die. Azkaban was a living hell, but at least a person could be taken out if it turned out they were innocent."

"But I'm talking about where it's temporary," pointed out Ron. "I think we can be pretty sure that anyone the Aurors catch like this is guilty, and this would only be until the end of this situation."

"That's true," she conceded. "And I'm not happy at the thought of Death Eaters escaping and killing any of you, or anyone for that matter. I'm just saying, it's a really hard issue. I don't envy you, Harry." He gave her a puzzled look, not understanding what she meant. "You're going to be asked what you think, publicly," she said sympathetically.

"Then I'll say what I think," he replied, still not understanding why she felt it would be such a problem. "Do you think I shouldn't?"

"No, I'm not saying that. It just... could be complicated. What I would say is, you should definitely talk to Archibald before you say anything. You have to be careful, your words have impact."

"Yes, that's true," agreed Neville. "Just ask any of the dozens of people here who've been called 'unbelievable morons' in the past week."

“I didn’t quite mean that kind of impact,” said Hermione, though knowing that Neville was joking.

“I guess I should find him, see if he’s going anywhere,” said Harry. “I should talk to Kingsley, too, see what the Aurors think.”

“Considering what happened yesterday, I’m not sure their opinion will be the same as it usually would,” suggested Neville.

“Strictly from the point of view of the Aurors’ best interests, they’d be for it,” said Hermione. “Between that and their emotional response, it would be a pretty strong statement of principle for them to oppose it, and my impression isn’t that they tend to take especially principled positions; most organizations take positions that reflect their interests. But, who knows; they might not even have a unified position at all. You’ve told me how they always argue.” Neville nodded in agreement.

Swallowing a bite of his food, Harry said, “Normally, that would be enough to think about for one morning. But not today, I get to go do some open-brain surgery.”

“Sounds kind of grim when you put it that way,” remarked Ron.

“It feels kind of grim,” said Harry. “I mean, his life is in my hands, and if I make one mistake... well, I try not to think about what could happen.”

“It’s not like that, Harry,” said Pansy earnestly. “His life ended, in any way that matters, when he had the Cleansing done. You’re just trying to give it back to him. If it doesn’t work, then he’s no worse off; I don’t think you could make him any worse off. Not with love. Even if he ends up not able to function, it would be in a better way than he is now. I’d rather be dead than the way he is now, I know that. Even before I knew that dead people go where Albus is, I’d have felt that way. You’re giving him a chance, not taking one from him. Please, look at it like that.”

He nodded reluctantly, and continued working on his food. He didn’t feel like eating, and wondered if it was nervousness. Five minutes later, he glanced up as

McGonagall stood behind him. “Harry, I know you are not finished, but could I have a word with you?”

He got up and walked with her to the teachers’ table. Before she could speak, he said, “I’ll be there as soon as I’m done with breakfast.” To her raised eyebrows, he added, “Albus told me that you would ask that. He also said you stayed up all night with Professor Snape. You must be tired.”

She shook her head. “I had him make me a Wakefulness Potion. It was a good idea, in the sense that it gave him something to do while we waited. Then I had him make a Calming Potion for himself; he reluctantly agreed to do so.

“There is another thing. Professor Snape would very much like, when you go in, to dispense with any small talk. He told me that he tolerated it in your sessions because he knew they were difficult for you, and chatting first made you comfortable. In this situation, it is he who needs to be comfortable, though we both understand this is stressful for you as well. Nonetheless, the fewer words, the better.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” he said. “Not that it matters, but is he any less mad at me than he was yesterday?”

“It is understandable that you would wonder what degree of hostility you will be facing,” she said. “He is somewhat less angry with you, though that is not saying much. It is more a feeling of resignation now.”

With a wry smile, he said, “You mean, like, what more can you expect from an addle-brained seventeen-year-old.”

“Something like that, yes,” she agreed, with the barest of smiles.

“Better than yesterday,” he said with a small shrug. “I’ll be there soon. Oh, by the way, is Archibald still here? There’s something I want to talk to him about.”

“He thought you might; I happened to run into him earlier. He is still here, so I will ask him to remain for a while. He has plenty of essays to mark, to keep him busy.” She paused, seeming to think for a few seconds. “Good luck,” she said

solemnly. "I do believe that you will do fine." He nodded his thanks, and she gave him a brief pat on the shoulder as she walked away. Harry returned to his seat.

His friends continued the conversation they'd been having while he talked to McGonagall, not disturbing him as he finished his food. After taking his last bite, he looked up at the others. "You all going to the Burrow?"

Some nodded, but Hermione said, "I'm going to stay for a while, get started on correcting the exams; I don't want to leave them all to the last minute. I'll be along later, maybe in time for lunch." Come to my office after you're done with Snape, she sent to Harry nonverbally. He made eye contact with her to indicate his acknowledgment.

Harry stood, saying, "Well, I'm off. See you all later."

"It'll be fine, Harry," said Pansy. Ginny kissed him on the cheek, and looked into his eyes with an expression that conveyed confidence. He thanked them, then headed out of the Great Hall, toward Snape's quarters.

He stood in the hall outside Snape's quarters, getting himself into the same mental state he did before sessions with Snape. Though it was a very different situation, it seemed like a good idea, especially if Snape was going to be emotionally difficult. Five minutes later, he knocked on Snape's door, which opened immediately.

Harry walked in, noticing that Snape's quarters were as spartan as his office. Snape was sitting on his sofa, staring off into space in front of him. Harry walked over and took the chair nearest the sofa as Snape lay down. "Ready?" he asked.

"I would like you to do the Full-Body Bind on me before you begin, so there will be no thrashing," Snape requested evenly. "I would also prefer to be Silenced; if I need to speak, I will look at you."

Harry nodded. "Before I start, I want to see your memory of being Cleansed. I've seen Voldemort's, but it'll be helpful to see yours as well." With a

small nod, Snape let Harry know that he could see it any time. “Keep it in the front of your mind; I may want to look at it sometimes.”

Well, thought Harry, I know what I’m going to do, as well as I ever will. He put Snape in the Full-Body Bind, Silenced him, then called up the same memory that Voldemort had. Snape started to scream in pain at the very memory, then as Harry applied the energy of love as he had to Voldemort, Snape screamed again, differently; Harry could tell that it was different even though there was no sound. He kept it up, and Snape was unconscious after twenty seconds. Harry continued for another minute, not sure how much longer he should keep going.

With Snape still unconscious, Harry looked again for the memory of Snape’s Cleansing, with a little more difficulty now that Snape wasn’t assisting him. Finally locating it, he skipped ahead to the second memory Voldemort called up. Harry called it up, and started applying the energy of love to it. He wondered how many memories Voldemort used when doing the Cleansing; he knew he had to be patient. Snape had not yet regained consciousness when Harry had finished—or, he hoped he had finished, it was difficult to know—with that memory. It’s much better when he’s unconscious, thought Harry. I sure hope it’s as effective. He looked for the third memory Voldemort had used when Cleansing Snape...

Responding to his knock, Hermione’s office door swung open; Harry entered and sat down heavily into the guest’s chair. “Tired?” she asked sympathetically.

He thought for a few seconds. “Kind of like, emotionally tired, or mentally tired. It’s a lot of concentration, a lot of pressure.”

“How did it go? How’s he doing?”

With an expression that suggested that he himself wasn’t sure, he replied, “It’s hard to know how it went, for now. As for how he’s doing... he’s very weak, I guess you could say. He had a lot of... pain, discomfort, whatever you want to call it, in the past hour and a half, so even though he’s conscious, he’s not really with it

right now. I don't know how long it'll be before we know anything. McGonagall's with him right now."

"Did you need his help while you did it?" she asked.

"A couple of times I asked him how something felt, if there was any difference between then and a few minutes ago, but after the first fifteen minutes, he wasn't in any condition to really answer questions. I think it was like, I was rubbing parts of his brain raw, and when you have that kind of pain for that long, it starts getting hard to say that one thing is better or worse than another. I asked him mainly because I wanted to know if an area was done. When I went over an area for the second time, it seemed to cause less pain than the first time, so I took that as a good sign."

Hermione shook her head in amazement. "Well, I guess there's one way we'll know whether it was really successful or not: if, after he's recovered, you can use the Imperius Charm on him successfully, then we'll know."

"Of course, it'll be a while before we try that," he said. "But I see what you mean."

After a short pause, she said, "I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable earlier, when I sent you that you shouldn't say anything to Ginny. I wasn't saying you should never tell her, just that I wanted to talk to you first. I was afraid that you'd just sit down this morning and mention it, and she might have a bad reaction."

"I know she's sensitive about it," said Harry, "but wouldn't she be happy that you helped me?"

Hermione's face reflected her uncertainty. "On one level, yes, I'm sure she would. But Harry, this is going to be an issue between you and her. I hope it's not much of one, but you remember what happened on the day of the attempt on Bright."

"But you said she apologized for that later on."

Doing her best to be patient, Hermione said, “She apologized for being snippy with me, not for the feelings she had. It’s really understandable that she’d be sensitive about this, Harry. You and I are really close, and generally, she has no problem with that, partly because she and I are such good friends too. She knows what our relationship is. But since I got Flora, there are now two ways that you and I can communicate without words, and both are arguably very... intimate. I mean, communicating directly with feelings, without words, is wonderful. I wish I could do it with Neville. You made me feel really good that day, and I know I helped a lot last night. I’m not saying I shouldn’t have done it; you really needed it, and I was very glad that I could help you. But Ginny may have mixed feelings, and I wanted to make sure you were aware of that.”

Harry was still confused, and thinking that he shouldn’t be, that there was something obvious he wasn’t getting. “Do you mean she’ll wish that you hadn’t done it?”

“No, I mean she’ll wish she could have,” explained Hermione. “She’ll also wish that you had called her on her pendant and talked to her. You heard what she said earlier, even without knowing that I helped you like I did. If you’re in distress, she wants you to reach out to her, so she can help you. It’s up to you to decide whether or not to mention to her what I did last night. I’m just saying, if you do, be aware that it could be a sensitive topic. She might not even tell you that she’s upset, if she is, because she might be ashamed of feeling that way. Two months ago, it just sort of spilled out, because she was upset.”

“But I shouldn’t be hiding things like this from her, should I? I mean, I don’t feel like there was anything wrong with what happened, but hiding it makes it feel like it was wrong.”

She nodded. “I know, that’s why the situation is delicate. You probably just didn’t think of calling her, you were alone with your thoughts. Well, not really, but usually people in that situation would be. You didn’t ask me for help, I just offered it. You might think, neither of us did anything wrong, so why should she be upset?”

Well, if she's upset, it wouldn't be at you or I exactly, just the situation—the situation where because of not having a phoenix and not doing Legilimency, she can't have the kind of connection with you that I have. That's not her fault either, it's really understandable. If another woman, even a friend, had those connections with Neville and I didn't, I might feel the same way. It's nobody's fault, but it has to be dealt with, or at least thought about."

Harry took a minute to think. He felt lost, not sure of what to do. "Do you think I should tell her, or not tell her?"

She let out a short sigh. "I don't know. In principle, the best thing to do is tell her, but it's also riskier. She was upset with you last time partly because of the timing of you telling her what you did, after she said it kind of bothered her. Honestly, there are good points and bad points for either one. The reason to tell her would be because you don't want to keep any secrets from her; the reason not to would be that you know it might upset her, and there's no particular need for her to know."

"Have you told Neville, or will you?"

She nodded her acknowledgment of the pertinence of the question. "I haven't had a chance to talk to him privately, but the answer is no, I'm not going to go out of my way to tell him. He isn't as bothered about this subject as Ginny—at least, not that I know of—but I don't see any reason to specifically mention it. If he asked if it's been especially helpful for us to be able to communicate like we do, I'd say yes, and if he asked for an example, I'd tell him. I don't mean for this to be a secret, Harry, or that there's anything wrong with it. I love Neville, and you love Ginny; they both know that. I just have to think about Neville's feelings in some situations, and you do with Ginny. It's hard for you, for both of you, the way your life is. You just have to decide which one you think is better."

He sighed in mild frustration. "I don't know which is better, that's the problem."

“I’m sorry, Harry,” she said sincerely. “I wish I could decide for you, but I can’t. I would only say that you shouldn’t lie. If by some strange chance she asked me if that kind of thing had ever happened, I would tell her the truth, and so should you. If you start lying to each other, even with good intentions, you could lose each other’s trust, and that’s really bad. Trust me, I know,” she added, with a very regretful expression.

“You never lied to Neville,” Harry pointed out.

“No, but I did lose his trust—”

“By not telling him something you should have,” Harry finished.

“By not telling him that I did something that violated his privacy,” responded Hermione. “This isn’t the same thing. I had an obligation to tell Neville then, and I didn’t. It’s not nearly so clear that you have any particular obligation to tell Ginny about this. She knows that we communicate by phoenix; we don’t go out of our way to mention it every time we do it. Another reason I won’t mention it to Neville is that while I’m not trying to hide it, I don’t want to rub his nose in it, either. If it comes up naturally, I’ll tell him.”

Harry still felt at a loss as to how to deal with the situation. “Well, I’ll think about it,” he finally said. “It’s not as though I don’t have enough to think about anyway, though. I still need to go talk to Archibald, so I suppose I can fit it in between worrying about capital punishment, and about whether Snape will be all right or not.”

“Maybe you could ask him about this,” she suggested. “He was married for a long time, his opinion would probably be more valuable than mine.”

He gave her a ‘maybe I will’ nod as he stood. He looked down for a second, then looked at her and said, “I really do appreciate what you did. After what we talked about, I feel bad saying this, but talking to Ginny on our hands wouldn’t have helped as much as that did. I hadn’t realized how weak words are, compared to feelings. I wish I could do that with her, too.”

“If it ever comes up, tell her that,” urged Hermione. “You can’t do the same thing with her, but it’ll mean something to her that you’d like to be able to. Even if you think she would know that, you should say it anyway.”

He nodded again. “See you back at the Burrow,” he said, and left.

He wasn’t sure whether to look in Dentus’s quarters or his office, so he checked the map, then headed to Dentus’s quarters. “Harry, come in,” said Dentus, after opening the door in response to Harry’s knock. “Have a seat.”

Harry sat in one of the two large, comfortable chairs that seemed to be in every teacher’s quarters, at least those he had seen so far. Dentus put aside the essays he had been reading, as Harry asked, “What are you doing for vacation?”

“Minerva’s asked that I stay here, to help keep an eye on things,” he said with mild amusement. “I’m sure that she made the request of me in particular out of concern for my safety; she knows that I’m still at a certain amount of risk at my home. It’s fairly small, but I wouldn’t have gone back anyway. I probably will make a few trips in, see some people. How about you?”

“Voldemort probably knows that better than I do. You know what I’d prefer, which is to do nothing, just lie around and relax. But who knows if that’s what I’ll get to do.”

“Seems like you’re getting closer to being able to do that, though,” commented Dentus. “The article was conspicuously silent on certain specifics, but it sounded like you were pretty close to taking him out. One stroke of good luck, and you might have him.”

One stroke of good thinking, and we might have him now, Harry thought. He shrugged, wanting to complain about his own stupidity, but managed to simply say, “I really hope so. Well, I wanted to talk to you about this business in the paper today. What do you think I ought to do?”

“You should start out by telling me what you want to do,” suggested Dentus. “I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you how you feel about it, just to tell

you what the political ins and outs are, what could happen if you do any particular thing. First of all, I assume you're opposed to this."

"Yes, I am. It said in the paper that Bright hadn't spoken about it yet, so I guess he hasn't made up his mind. If I talked to him, do you think he'd listen?"

"He'd definitely listen, but I think you mean, 'would he be more likely to do what I'd like him to do,' and that's a difficult question," said Dentus thoughtfully. "A lot of it depends on something we can't know: whether or not he has strong personal feelings on the issue. His feelings may influence him one way or the other. I can tell you, though, what's what if he views it as a strictly political matter, where his personal feelings don't enter into it, or aren't important."

"Okay, tell me that, then," asked Harry.

"If that's the case, he's going to be for it, for sure," said Dentus. "There's just no political downside to this. It's the practical thing to do, and it'll very likely save innocent lives. Some people will oppose it, a few strongly, but most people don't get excited about matters of principle, sad to say. Security will always trump principle in the public arena. And you don't even have to be for it in general to be for it now, since it's advertised as being only temporary. He can say what that unnamed Undersecretary said in the article, and people would nod and say, yes, it's a shame, but the Minister's right, something has to be done. He would also be on the right side of people's emotions. It's not hard to imagine a rally through Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley, led by the relatives of the people killed, calling for the Death Eaters' heads. That would get a lot of sympathy; it would take a brave politician to oppose that. And in politics, there's a joke that 'brave' is short for 'politically imprudent.'

"There is also a big downside to opposing this: it would put him on the spot for whatever happens next. If a lot of Death Eaters were broken out, he'd be blamed, and his popularity could easily dive. It would be an enormous chance to take, and from a straight political point of view, isn't worth taking. It's not a tough call."

Harry recalled that Bright had said that most of the time, he would do the thing that got him the most support rather than what was right. “Suppose he wanted to oppose it, but was afraid to for the reasons you said. If I publicly opposed it, how much would that help him?”

“Quite a bit,” said Dentus. “You’d be giving him cover, at least for a while. You’d essentially be saying, ‘If things go wrong, you can blame me, not him.’ That would work for as long as your popularity lasted, and that would be as long as there were no escapes and relatively few killings. Once your popularity was more or less exhausted, he’d be on the spot again. Speaking as someone who has your best interests at heart, that would be a hell of a thing to risk your popularity on.”

“But what good is my popularity, if not to spend on doing the right thing?” asked Harry.

“Of course, you have to decide that,” conceded Dentus. “But you know very well that the chances of things going badly are high. Using your popularity for this would essentially be a Dumbledore thing to do; it wouldn’t last long. You might be able to do better things with it if you kept it. Suppose something controversial needs to be done at some point to help catch Voldemort. If you spend it on this, you very likely won’t have it then.”

“It sounds like you’re saying that I shouldn’t oppose it, even if I think it’s wrong,” observed Harry.

“Not exactly. It’s more like I’m saying that it’s a gamble, and not a very good one. You could oppose it, things could—and probably would—go badly, then you could lose your influence and the executions would happen anyway, just later. I know you’re not about practicality, but that’s what you have me for.”

“Just out of curiosity, suppose Bright looks at it from just a political point of view, and I tell him that I’m going to do everything I can to oppose this. Could I succeed in stopping it, and is there any chance that my doing that would change his mind? That is, would the politics change for him?”

Dentus smiled. “You really are learning; you wouldn’t have asked this question a half a year ago. The answer to the second question is that it almost certainly wouldn’t change his mind. He’d say, be my guest; I’ll support it, and if you stop it, that’s fine, but if things go badly then I’ll shake my head sadly and say, he meant well, but look what’s happened. He’d be on the right side of the issue politically.

“As to your first question, we can’t know for sure, but I think there’s a decent chance that you’d be able to stop it, at least for a while. If you killed or captured Voldemort fairly soon, it could hold, and you’d have stopped it. A lot would depend on what happened after that. But yes, if you made it a cause, made it a priority, you could do a lot to stop it. There would just be a high risk, and a high price tag, not just a political one.” To Harry’s querulous expression, Dentus added, “Stepping outside of politics for a minute, I’m referring to what would happen if you stopped it, and there was a mass escape, followed by an increase in killings. Politically, you would be blamed. Worse, personally, you would blame yourself. That’s not something I want to see.”

Harry was silent for a minute as he pondered what Dentus had said. It seemed like a very high price to pay for doing the right thing. Struck by a sudden thought, he asked, “Archibald... personally, not politically, how would you feel if I opposed this publicly?”

Dentus nodded slowly, understanding Harry’s meaning. “It’s thoughtful of you to ask; I know it’s because of Sarah that you do. But it wouldn’t bother me. Personally, I don’t oppose it. I’m all for principle, but I can’t sacrifice people’s lives to it like Albus was willing to. Not that people would definitely die, but there’s a good chance of it. If you opposed it, I would respect that, and support you publicly.

“But, again in a non-political vein... I am concerned about something, and that’s you. If what I mentioned before happened, you’d suffer for it, and I don’t know how much you can bear, on top of all your other things. If you stopped it,

you'd be taking responsibility for it. If you let it pass, it's just the will of society; you have nothing to do with it either way. I just want to be sure you understand what you could be getting yourself into."

Harry's own words to the second years echoed in his mind: Don't go into danger unless you know what you're facing. If he involved himself in this situation, he would be facing a great moral danger either way he chose. "If I could stop it, and don't, am I then responsible for what happens?" he wondered aloud, more to himself than Dentus.

"You can't place all that on your shoulders, Harry," Dentus said gently. "It's just too much. You're one person, and there are societal forces at work here. It's too much to ask of one person that he risk so much to try to push back those forces. You do so much as it is. Give yourself a break."

"Thanks," said Harry, appreciating Dentus's sentiment. "I'm going to at least talk to Bright, see what he says. If I decide to do anything, I'll let you know before I do. But it is very tempting to just decide to do nothing for two weeks except enjoy being with Ginny, and everyone at the Burrow."

"I hope you can manage it," said Dentus.

"I'll try," said Harry. "Oh, there's one other thing I was thinking about, about the meeting tomorrow with the parents. I was worried that some parents might blame her for what happened last week, even though it wasn't her fault, and she can't tell them how it happened because of security. Do you think it would help if Bright showed up at the meeting, and told the parents why McGonagall can't say anything about it, and let them know that she has his support, that kind of thing?"

Harry saw on Dentus's face an expression he'd seen a number of times before; he thought of it as Dentus's 'it would be nice if life were like that, but it isn't' expression. "Yes, it would help, but he's not going to do it. There's nothing in it for him, and it's risky. The problem for him is that if he does that, he's joining her in assuring the parents that the students will be safe, meaning that if it happened

again, he'd be joining her in taking the blame. There's just no good reason for him to do that."

Harry exhaled, frustrated with politics. "That really seems... cowardly."

Dentus nodded in sympathy. "You would put your life on the line to support a friend, so I can understand why you would say that. But, honestly, Harry, if I were him, I wouldn't do it either. It would be a kind and supportive thing to do, but it just wouldn't help Professor McGonagall that much. He does support what you do, I think you know that. It's just a matter of spending political capital where it's most effective. Maybe it's a little similar to when in July, Fudge asked you and the others to protect him. The costs outweighed the benefits, and you didn't do it, which in spite of what happened was the right decision." Seeing Harry's expression of regret, Dentus added, "Again, that was not your fault; he wasn't careful enough. Anyway, I do think you'll get his support when you ask him to do something that has tangible, real benefits that offset the political risks."

At that moment, Harry wasn't so sure of that, but he supposed Dentus knew better than he. He thanked Dentus, and left.

Outside Dentus's quarters, as Harry called Fawkes, he had an odd thought: he felt as though he really wanted a hamburger, even though it wasn't lunchtime yet. It just sounded good. Maybe we can go to Diagon Alley, he thought. A year ago, he would have worried about the danger; now, he didn't, because he was sure he and the others could stop anything that happened.

As Harry reached for Fawkes' tail feathers, an owl fluttered into view, and settled on his shoulder. "Sorry, Fawkes," said Harry, as Fawkes perched on Harry's free shoulder. He started to walk toward McGonagall's office, but the owl took flight, heading in another direction. Ah, she must be somewhere else, he thought. He followed the owl to the Great Hall, where he found McGonagall at the teachers' table.

"I wanted to let you know that a time has been decided for the meeting we discussed," she said. "It will be held at two p.m. tomorrow. The location is being

kept undisclosed for security reasons; attendees will go to the Ministry, and from there, be directed further. You and Hermione should go to Auror headquarters; they will take you from there.”

“Okay, thanks,” he said. “Oh, Professor... what do you think, about the thing in the paper this morning?”

“Taking a survey, are you?” she asked, with a shrewd expression. “Well, there is enough of Albus in me that I do not support it. Killing is wrong, and while you already know that I will condone it under extraordinary circumstances, I believe that it is possible to keep prisoners in custody without resorting to this. Maximum measures have not yet been attempted, and I do not believe in killing for the sake of revenge, which I believe this would be. This is society’s revenge. It is understandable, but it is still revenge.”

He nodded. “Thanks.”

She hesitated for a moment, then added, “Before I let you go... I am concerned, that if you decide to take this upon yourself...” She trailed off as he nodded, indicating that she needn’t continue. “Archibald already talked to me about this. But, thanks.”

“We are both concerned, as I am sure others will be. Well, you should go. I will see you tomorrow, and you can contact me on my pendant if you wish.” Fawkes took flight, and they were gone.

He was suddenly in the kitchen at the Burrow; Molly and Ginny were talking as Molly prepared lunch. “Harry!” they exclaimed in chorus. Molly stepped over and hugged him tightly, then kissed him on the cheek. Ginny patiently waited her turn, then gave him a long kiss on the lips. “There’s more where that came from,” she assured him with a smile.

Smiling as well, he replied, “Great, let’s go upstairs.”

Molly chuckled. “Don’t tempt me,” responded Ginny.

Looking around, Harry said, "It's good to be back here. It really... feels like home. Funny how you appreciate that when you never really had it."

"It warms my heart to hear you say that, dear," said Molly as she returned her attention to food preparation. "Now, go on into the living room, I think they're waiting for you."

He did, and was soon greeted by Arthur. "Good to see you, Harry," he said. He started to offer his hand, then remembered, and patted Harry on the back instead.

"Good to see you..." Harry trailed off as he looked past Arthur into the living room. He saw Ron, Pansy, Hermione, Neville... and to his shock, sitting at the computer... "Dudley?" he exclaimed, eyebrows rising high.

Enjoying Harry's expression, Dudley got up and approached him, hand extended. "Hi there... come to think of it, maybe I shouldn't get my hand anywhere near you. You might have a flashback," he joked, comically withdrawing his hand slightly.

Ginny stepped over and ostentatiously looked at Dudley's wrist. "No, no bracelet, so it should be okay. But you might want to shake the hand that wasn't badly burned yesterday."

"Yes, Harry's so absent-minded, he'd probably forget, and shake it anyway," said Ron.

"Actually, it's a lot better today, I can move it around with only a little pain—"

"You're still going to St. Mungo's, though," warned Ginny. "You're not getting out of that."

"If you say so, dear," he joked.

Ginny gave him a 'very funny' look. "Yeah, it doesn't look too bad, compared to that picture in the paper," noted Dudley. "And before you ask 'what's he doing here?' this is the third time I've been over here in the past few months."

"You gave us his e-mail address, so we've been in contact since we got the computer," explained Arthur. "We've talked a fair bit on the chatting software."

“The what?” asked Harry.

“It’s like a computer equivalent to the notebooks you bought for Pansy last year,” said Arthur, “it lets people communicate in writing at a distance. Muggles can do more and more things with technology that we do with magic. Anyway, we talked a few times, and Molly and I told him that he should come over some weekend when he was free.”

“And Mum wouldn’t find out about it,” added Dudley. “Not that I can’t do what I want, but I just don’t need the reaction.”

“I can only imagine,” agreed Harry, still stunned. “Did you take the fireplace over?”

Dudley nodded. “It turns out there’s a public fireplace not too far from Smeltings, so it’s no problem. I could do it from home, but I’d have to be careful, obviously. Long as I don’t come home a toad, they’ll never know.”

“Just stay away from Fred and George, you should be fine,” joked Ron.

“Now, Dudley, I’ve told you that that’s a misconception, that people don’t get turned into toads,” admonished Molly.

“Notice she didn’t deny the bit about Fred and George,” said Ron. “People do get turned into ferrets, though.” He went on to explain the reference to Dudley, who laughed.

Harry knew that Arthur’s interest in Dudley was mostly due to his general interest in Muggles; he wondered whether Molly’s part in getting to know Dudley better was a part of her effort to reconcile Harry and the Dursleys. As for Dudley, he had no idea, and could only guess that Dudley was simply becoming more and more interested in the wizarding world. He wondered if his own fame made it more interesting for Dudley.

“So, you’re still reading those Internet pages about wizarding?” asked Harry.

“More than that,” said Arthur. “He’s in contact with some of the people who write them.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up again. “And they know who you are?”

Dudley chuckled. “Yes, it’s pretty amazing, just being Harry Potter’s cousin gets people’s interest. I didn’t tell them who I was at first, I just said that I was a Muggle with a relative who was a wizard. I got to know them a little bit, then later I told them who I was. They were pretty surprised.”

I’ll bet, Harry thought. He was impressed that Dudley had even bothered to do that, considering the hostile reaction Harry knew he would receive based on the Skeeter article.

“Do they ask you all kinds of questions about Harry?” asked Pansy, with a teasing glance at Harry.

“A few,” he said. “I just tell them that I hadn’t seen him much since he went to Hogwarts, and that he was just a normal kid before that. They’re more interested in what he’s doing now, and I can’t tell them much about that.”

“But they’re reading the Prophet, aren’t they?” asked Neville.

“Not only that, they scan it in and put anything interesting on their site,” said Dudley. “But they don’t believe the Prophet tells them everything. For example, just now, I’ve been talking to some people. They put up the articles from this morning, which is how I read about it. They’re sure there’s a lot about what happened that the paper didn’t include, that there are a lot of gaps in the story.”

“Well, of course,” said Hermione. “Some things have to be kept secret, I’m sure they understand the need for that.”

“Oh, they know,” agreed Dudley. “That doesn’t stop them from guessing, though. I think it’s kind of fun for them, actually. Right now, the big topic is exactly how you’re going to end up defeating Voldemort.”

Harry chuckled. “They shouldn’t bother, they couldn’t possibly guess it.”

“Oh, so you know what it is,” noted Dudley. “They thought you didn’t yet. They said that you said to your class that you would know what to do when the time came, which meant you didn’t know what it was. I guess you found out yesterday.”

“Don’t tell anyone, even that,” said Neville. “That’s seriously something we don’t want Voldemort knowing.”

“I don’t think Voldemort reads these pages,” said Dudley lightly. “They complain that hardly any witches and wizards do. But I won’t tell anyone anyway, don’t worry. I suppose they could gossip about it directly to others, and it could get out that way. Even then, it would only be a rumor. I think anything that’s not in that paper is more or less a rumor.”

Harry was stunned again. “How in the world do they know what I said to my classes? And that was only a week ago!”

“Yes, you should be surprised,” said Ginny, with a straight face. “No one really takes an interest in anything you say.”

“People would find that particular comment very interesting, considering it addressed one thing they really want to know about,” pointed out Hermione. “I assume that someone mentioned it in an owl, maybe more than one person, and it spread. It could have even been someone not in that class, but who heard about it from someone who was.”

Harry shook his head in amazement. “I guess I’d better be pretty careful what I say, then.” He took Ginny’s hand and sat on the sofa, putting an arm around her. “Boy, is it nice to be able to do this again,” he said, smiling at her. “I kind of got used to it over the summer.”

“You sure you don’t just want to go upstairs?” smirked Dudley.

Seeing an opportunity too good to pass up, Harry responded, “I’m flattered, Dudley, but I really prefer Ginny.”

The other five chuckled as Dudley gave Harry an annoyed look. “I guess I walked right into that one,” he admitted as he sat back down at the computer.

Ron, Neville, and Pansy started talking about classes and the end-of-term examinations, while Harry listened, relaxed, and enjoyed holding Ginny. It seemed very strange for Dudley to be around, but Harry knew he wouldn’t be there too

much over the vacation, if only because it was difficult for him to arrange. Still, he wasn't behaving badly, so Harry supposed he didn't mind.

After about ten minutes, Harry was jolted out of his reverie. "Hey," said Dudley. "I'm talking with a few people in Hogsmeade, and they say their magic isn't working."

Harry and the others exchanged worried glances. "Do you suppose they could have planted lutas in Hogsmeade also?" asked Ginny.

"I can't see why not, it would be easier than getting them into Hogwarts," said Hermione.

"How many people are saying that, Dudley?" asked Arthur.

"Two... no, a third said so too, and he said no one in his family can," said Dudley, looking at the screen intently.

"Arthur," said Harry, "go to the Aurors, get Winston. If we have to go—"

"Shouldn't we go anyway, just as a precaution?" asked Hermione urgently. "I mean, what if—"

"They say there's strange sounds," reported Dudley, as Harry and Ginny stood. "Popping noises... it sounds like they're describing gunfire—"

Fawkes and Flora burst into view, above Harry and Hermione. "Repulsion Charms!" he said unnecessarily as Ginny and Ron threw arms around his shoulders. Arthur dashed for the fireplace, and they were gone.

On the main road in Hogsmeade, Harry looked around as Hermione, Neville, and Pansy arrived. There were no obvious assailants, but he could now also hear machine gun fire in the distance. "Groups of two, don't worry about Stunning them, just let them shoot," suggested Harry, worried that a lucky shot while a Stunning Spell was being done would hit just as the Repulsion Charm was down. He knew that the Repulsion Charm tended to last for about five seconds if the user wasn't focusing on keeping it going, but he didn't want to take even the smallest chance that one of his friends would become so involved in Stunning attackers that they'd forget to update the Repulsion Charm. Fleeting, he realized these were

different instructions than he'd given against the mercenaries in September, but he had no time to stop and wonder why.

Harry ran off, Ginny's hand in his, as the other four went the other way down the road, away from Hogwarts. He got closer to the sound of the guns, when suddenly he heard more, from a new direction. He and Ginny turned a corner and saw a man with a gun, his back partially turned from them. Ginny shot off a Stunning Spell immediately, and the man went down.

"Next time, just yell, let him shoot," said Harry, almost shouting, concerned for Ginny's safety. "There could be snipers."

"What's a sniper?" asked Ginny.

Harry ran again, deciding to explain it later. "Look!" he exclaimed. He pointed to a spot four buildings away, where four men with machine guns turned the corner, and started firing into a home through the windows. He and Ginny broke into a run. He shouted, "Hey! Over here!"

Seeing Harry and Ginny, the gunmen opened fire. It was strange, Harry felt, to run into gunfire rather than dodge away from it. Expecting to see the gunmen go down, Harry was startled to see the scene change dramatically: in an instant, the gunmen were on the ground, wrapped in ropes, and Hermione was standing in front of he and Ginny, two yards away.

They came skidding to a stop. "What the..." gaped Harry. He glanced at Ginny, who pointed to her neck, then to Hermione. Ah, he realized, the time-stopping device.

"It's all under control, and Aurors and St. Mungo's emergency people are here," Hermione informed them. "They're looking for anyone in their homes who might be hurt. Ron, Neville, and Pansy are Apparating people in."

Harry's first thought was to help, but then he had a better idea. "I'm going to Apparate around, see if I can sense any Death Eaters. They wouldn't be attacking, but they might be nearby." As he spoke, he got an impression from Fawkes that Fawkes and Flora had looked around, and hadn't yet seen any lutas

nearby. Exchanging a glance with Hermione, he saw that Flora had informed her as well.

“Good idea,” said Hermione. “I’m going to go help with moving people, I just wanted to let you know what had happened.” She Disapparated.

“Coming?” he asked Ginny.

“You bet. You should Apparate me around, since you’re the one who’s deciding where to go.”

He started to Apparate them from place to place. At the fifth place, the end of the main road of Hogsmeade, there was a man in black robes running toward him. He immediately applied the Imperius Charm, and the man came to a stop a few feet in front of Harry and Ginny.

“Who are you?” asked Harry. “What are you doing?”

“I’m Norbert Simmons,” the man replied. “I live over there. I was just taking a walk and I heard the sounds, I was coming back to find out what was going on.”

Harry lifted the Charm. “It’s all right, it’s taken care of,” he assured the man. “We’re checking for Death Eaters who still might be around, sorry I had to do that.”

The man’s eyes widened. “That was the Imperius Charm?”

Harry nodded. “Sorry, we have to go.”

His hand on Ginny’s shoulder, he Disapparated again. In the field where the Sorting had been done, they saw nothing. He Apparated to a place further out of Hogsmeade, and saw another man in a black robe, about twenty yards away, also running, but away from Hogsmeade. Harry Apparated very close to the man, and applied the Imperius Charm; the man collapsed, screaming.

Harry looked toward where the man had been running. He could see nothing except an old tennis racquet on the ground fifteen feet ahead. As the Death Eater stopped screaming and passed out, he ran toward it.

“Harry? What are you doing?”

“This could be a—”

“Harry, no!” screamed Ginny as Harry grabbed the racquet. His world spun, and he was suddenly in a junkyard. He looked around to see if he’d been seen; there were a few people, but apparently his appearance had gone unnoticed. Dropping the racquet, he looked around, and realized his task was hopeless. No doubt one had to find another Portkey to return to base, and there were literally thousands of things that it could be; he couldn’t start picking up everything. Frustrated, he picked up the racquet again, and in a second, was back where he had been before.

The Death Eater was in ropes, unconscious. Very anxious, Ginny ran up to Harry. “Are you all right?”

He nodded. “It was just a junkyard. Obviously, to get to Death Eater headquarters, you have to know which item in the junkyard is the Portkey.”

“So when you grabbed that thing, you were hoping to be taken to their headquarters?”

“Something like that,” he agreed.

Her mouth dropped open in shock and anger. “Are you serious? Do you know how incredibly stupid that was?” she yelled. “Running into Death Eater Central alone, when there could have been a hundred Dark wizards waiting for you? That was your plan?”

“They couldn’t have done anything—”

“You’re not indestructible!!” she screamed. “You could be killed! And if you keep on doing things like that, you will be! Do you know how hard this is for me, just what happens all the time anyway? How hard it was not to say anything yesterday after you ignored Albus’s warning? I didn’t say anything about that, because I know why you went, you had to help the Aurors. If I’d been there, I’d have been begging and pleading for you not to go, but I know you’d have gone anyway. But this? This is so...” she trailed off, at a loss for words.

Harry had never seen her so angry, and felt chagrined, defensive, and angry himself. “I was going to say, they couldn’t have done anything before I’d be able to

Disapparate away. I wasn't planning on taking all of them on. I was going to Disapparate, and get you guys and the Aurors, and go in."

"Did you hear anything I just said?" she demanded, still shouting. "You're acting like there was no risk in what you did. There was a huge risk! But I'm not only talking about it as something tactical, I'm talking as the person whose life is going to be ruined if you get killed! Would you please think about it like that for a minute? What if I went running off into who knows what danger without a thought? Would that bother you?"

He stared at her, angry and trying to calm down. He didn't answer, because he knew it would bother him. "I have to fight Voldemort, I have to do things like this."

"You have to fight Voldemort, but you *don't* have to do things like this," she said with intensity. "You don't have to go running through every door, not knowing where it'll lead. I know how badly you want to get him—"

"No, you don't!" he shouted, as his chest tightened. He felt tears threaten, and was amazed at how fast it had happened. "I have to..."

Her anger faded somewhat, replaced by sadness and compassion. "No, you don't. You have nothing to make up for. I know you feel like you do, but you don't. Please, don't do this to yourself."

"I should have had him yesterday," he said quietly, doing his best to hold back his emotions. "Maybe it's 'understandable' that I didn't, but I should have..."

"That's done, Harry. All you can do is what you can do from now forward. If you made a mistake yesterday—and I don't accept that you did—but even if you did, you can only make up for it by doing better, by thinking better. And this was not good thinking, it was a lack of thinking. It was running into a dangerous situation totally blind."

He stared at her, his emotions churning, trying to work out what he thought. She reached out and took his left hand in hers. "Just promise me one thing," she said, her tone very serious. "The next time you want to do something

like this, take me with you. Take me, and I won't complain, no matter what you do. If it's safe, there's no harm in taking me, and if it's not, then I'd rather die with you than live alone."

"But you might die, and I might live," he pointed out.

"Then at least, you'd still be alive," she said, looking into his eyes.

"If you were gone, I wouldn't care," he said.

"That's right," she agreed. "Think about that, and put yourself in my position, the next time you do something like what you just tried to do. You'll understand how it makes me feel."

He suddenly understood, in a way he hadn't thought of before. More not thinking, he thought ruefully. Before, if he risked his life, he didn't really think about how it would affect anyone but himself. He now realized that he had to think about his own life with the value equal to what he placed on Ginny's, because that was what it meant to her, and if it was important to her, it had to be important to him.

She saw the realization in his eyes, and stepped forward to hug him. "I'm sorry," he said, as he buried his head in her shoulder. "As much for not understanding how you feel as for taking the Portkey."

"Relationships are hard, Albus said so when he was alive," she said, holding him tightly. "For someone in your position, who has the burdens you have, it's even harder. It's hard for you to think about how things affect me, because they're so hard for you anyway. I understand that, I really do. I do my best to be tolerant. It's just... sometimes I can't deal with something, like this. So, this happens."

He continued holding her, unable to think of anything to say, except the one thing he could always say. "I love you," he said.

"I love you, too," she answered. She let go of him, then reached up and touched his face. "Let me ask you, and I promise I won't be upset at either answer... if you had to choose between taking that Portkey with me, or not doing it, which would you have done?"

He found that he didn't have to think hard. "I wouldn't have done it."

She nodded slowly. "There you are. I just want you to think of every risk you take for yourself as if it were one for me, too, because it is."

He breathed deeply, then said, "I'm afraid if I do that, I'll be paralyzed with fear. Sometimes I think that not thinking about the danger I'm in is part of what gets me through it."

"I can understand that. But it still doesn't change how I feel. Maybe there's a middle area somewhere, where you can at least consider it without being paralyzed by it. Just, please, take a second to think about things."

"Everyone keeps telling me that, you'd think I'd listen at some point." Gesturing to the Death Eater on the ground, he said, "Is he still unconscious?"

She leaned over to look at his face. "I think so. Why?"

"I'd be curious to know what caused the magic to go out," he said. He did Legilimens on the man, searching for memories of his mission. At least I don't have to worry about doing this to Death Eaters anymore, he thought, Snape is already blown.

Ginny was silent while he did it. After five minutes, he stood. He walked in the direction of where the Portkey had been, and picked up what looked like a dark stone, except it was shaped like a perfect right triangle, an inch thick, the longest side five inches long. "C'mon, let's get him back to Auror headquarters."

"What's that?" she asked.

Holding it up, he answered, "One of the four pieces of what Snape referred to as the Four Corners artifact."

CHAPTER 18

MEETING THE PARENTS

An hour later, Harry took the first bite of one of the sandwiches Molly had made for lunch. “Forty dead,” said Neville, shaking his head. They had returned to the Burrow from their debriefing at Auror headquarters twenty minutes ago, except for Harry, who Kingsley had talked to privately for another ten minutes.

“Like Kingsley said, it would have been much more if not for Hermione,” said Pansy.

“I just happen to be the one wearing it,” protested Hermione.

“You thought of using it,” countered Harry. “That’s why you have it, and not me. I doubt I would have thought of it.”

“Sorry we didn’t come back and get you,” she said. “I know you would have wanted to help us, but looking for you would have cost more time, and I still don’t know how much time this has left, or if it recharges.”

“How much time did you end up using it?” asked Dudley. He had already, on their return, asked for every bit of information they could provide. Harry assumed that Dudley’s interest was especially high since this was the first wizarding event in which he had been involved, if only peripherally. Not counting the dementors, Harry added to himself, he probably doesn’t really want to remember that.

“I think about fifteen minutes,” said Hermione, in between bites of potato chips. “A little less than I used it for the wasp attack, so even if it’s not rechargeable, if Voldemort was right, it’s still got an hour or so left.”

“So, what did Kingsley—now, he’s the bald, black guy, right? I thought I remembered him—what did he keep you back to tell you?” asked Dudley.

Harry recalled that Dudley had seen Kingsley when Malfoy had been caught. “Just to tell me, not that I didn’t know already, that taking that Portkey wasn’t the wisest thing I ever did.”

“Only less nicely than that, right?” guessed Dudley.

Harry shook his head. “No, he was nice about it, he usually is when he tells me I’ve done something stupid. He just pointed out that the thing to do was to consult with him immediately, get us all on board right away. He did say that if a fully trained Auror did that, it would mean that they weren’t fully trained.”

Ron chuckled. “Well, at least he reprimands you with humor. Would it help if I told you that it was a very typical thing for you to do?”

“Since we’re talking about something I did that was stupid, no, not really,” Harry responded. “But I appreciate the thought.”

“No problem. Oh, you said you’d tell us more about what you saw in that Death Eater’s mind.”

Harry nodded. “A few things, some of which I told Kingsley when I talked to him afterwards. First of all, the Death Eater himself... it was Avery.”

“Oh, great,” sighed Pansy. She then explained the background to a curious Dudley. “I wonder, who gets to be the one to tell him they’re going to execute his father.”

“Either his mother, or McGonagall, depending on when it happens,” said Neville. “You don’t suppose there’s any chance they wouldn’t execute him, is there? He didn’t directly kill anyone.”

“He helped put the artifact in place, which led to forty deaths,” pointed out Hermione. “But I think right now, just being a Death Eater will do it, it won’t matter if they actually did anything.”

“And it shouldn’t,” argued Ron. “Being a Death Eater means you’ve agreed to become Voldemort’s servant, which means you agreed to kill, that you would kill if he told you to. Not that I envy his kid, but they can’t make exceptions.”

“I know,” agreed Pansy. “It’s just going to call attention to his family situation among other students, even if it doesn’t affect him so much, which it would almost have to.”

“It’s not good,” said Harry. “I wished it hadn’t been him, if only for Marcus’s sake. Anyway, the most interesting thing I found was that Voldemort did order this... sort of. I say that because he’s not really in his right mind right now. Usually he plans operations carefully, but this one was done on the spur of the moment; he just ordered it this morning. Apparently he’s been half-crazed since they got him back. The Death Eaters are wondering what in the world I did to him; they can’t even guess, but of course they know it was me.

“So, this morning, Voldemort ordered them to do this. He wanted the maximum number of people killed, as soon as possible. One of them tried to tell him that if it was that easy, they’d have done it already. He said it much more politely than that, but Voldemort still gave him a minute of the Cruciatus Curse just for saying even that much. He told them to use the Four Corners artifact. They were surprised, and they thought it wasn’t a good idea, but everyone was afraid to say anything remotely like that.”

“Wonder why,” said Ron, clearly not bothered at the thought.

“Why was it not a good idea?” wondered Dudley. “After all, it worked.”

“The problem wasn’t whether it would work,” explained Harry. “It was that they were saving it for an attack on Hogwarts, planned for sometime in January. Set it up, take down Hogwarts’ defense and magic again, and attack the castle with everything they have. Avery didn’t know the details, but he assumed it would involve some giants, and the dementors. It makes sense. So, using it for this was a bad idea for two reasons. Even if we never figured out what took out Hogsmeade’s magic, we would know they had something that could, which would warn us to prepare for an attack on the castle.”

“But they know you’ve been teaching combat flying, so you must be thinking about an attack like that,” said Ron.

“Yeah, but my preparing for it is different from us knowing that they’re going to do it. Anyway, the other reason it was a bad idea is the one that happened: one of them got caught, and a piece of the artifact with him. They had this hugely strategically valuable artifact, and they lost it, because Voldemort wasn’t thinking straight. He’s still in incredible pain, furious, and scared. He wants someone to pay for what I did, and if it can’t be me, or the rest of you...”

Sitting on his right, Hermione gripped his forearm for a few seconds. “Which in no way makes it your fault.”

He gave her a puzzled look. “Did you get that from the phoenixes?”

She gave him a sad smile. “No, I got it from knowing you. You start blaming yourself every time there’s the smallest causal connection involving you, and people’s deaths. You’re at the center of this fight, Harry. You hurt him worse than he thought he could be hurt, and he’s lashing out. That was bound to happen if things started going against him. It’s like those Muggle nature shows; predators are most dangerous when they’re wounded and cornered. He may not be cornered yet, but it’s getting close, and he’s really wounded. We just have to keep up the pressure. Just imagine how many would be dead by now, if not for you.”

Harry pondered that in silence, then continued. “Well, that was the main thing I got from Avery’s memories. Another thing was that he was nervous about going on this mission, because of the whole business about killing captured Death Eaters.”

Ron nodded. “I’m not surprised. I assume that like him, they don’t believe in life after death, so that’d scare them pretty bad. Another reason to do it.”

Harry wasn’t so sure. “They’re more scared of Voldemort than of death, though. If he tells them to do something, they’ll still do it.”

“Still, better to have them scared, though,” said Ron. Harry didn’t answer, because he didn’t feel like discussing the capital punishment issue right then. “Seems more likely that it’ll happen now, anyway.”

“That’s very true,” agreed Hermione. “People were already angry, and this is only going to make them angrier. It’ll be harder to find people who oppose this.”

“Why would anyone oppose it?” asked Dudley, surprised. “After what they’ve done...”

Hermione explained her and Harry’s reasons for opposing it; Dudley was obviously unimpressed. “Well, that’s all noble and everything, but in the meantime, they keep killing people.” Harry wasn’t surprised that Dudley would take that position; he imagined that Vernon would as well, if the situation involved Muggles instead of wizards. “I kept talking to the people in Hogsmeade after you left, of course. They were like, I hope they kill them all. I can see why they would say that.”

“Unfortunately, I can too,” said Hermione. “What did Archibald say this morning, Harry?”

“He said I might be able to stop it if I tried really hard.” The others looked at him, wanting to know the answer to the next question, but not wanting to ask. “I don’t know if I will or not. I’m going to talk to Bright later, see what he thinks. I just... haven’t had much time to think about it. Sometimes it seems like each choice is worst, except for the other.”

There was silence for a moment, which Molly broke by offering cookies. The topic of conversation changed, and he said nothing for a while.

Two hours later, he stepped out of the fireplace in the Minister of Magic’s outer office. The secretary, an older, blonde witch, smiled at him. “The Minister is ready to see you, Professor,” she said, gesturing him to the door. Nodding his thanks, he opened it.

Bright got up from his desk and walked over. “It’s difficult not to want to shake your hand, it’s such a reflex,” he said with a grin. “How’s it doing?” He gestured Harry to a chair, and they both sat.

“Much better, thanks. Ginny dragged me to St. Mungo’s after lunch, and they basically looked at it, said it was doing well, warned me not to touch things, and let me go. Kind of a waste of time, really.”

Bright chuckled. “I’ve had the same experience with Madeline, more than once. Best to do what they tell you, both your spouse and your Healer.” Deciding to get down to business, Bright shifted in his chair to a more alert pose. “So, Harry, what brings you here today?”

Harry smiled a little. “That’s a joke, right?”

“A small one, yes. Though while I do know what brings you here, I don’t know exactly what you plan to say.” He looked at Harry expectantly.

“First of all, I want to know how you feel about this. I mean... Archibald did warn me that how you feel and what you plan to do may be two different things, but mainly, I want to know how you feel about it.”

Bright nodded slightly; his expression suggested to Harry that he was going to say something Harry didn’t like. “Yes, they are different things. As for how I feel about it, I don’t like it. Like you, I think that killing people is wrong. If I were a dictator, I would say no, we’re not going to kill them, and I would draft people from the population to spend a few hours every week guarding them, taking turns, so the prisoners were well guarded, and I would accelerate the building of the prison. I would feel that it would be worth it to avoid having to kill people, as much as they may deserve it.

“But, alas, I’m not a dictator; I’m a politician. I have to believe that Dentus told you that for me, this is a no-brainer, that I’d be stupid not to do it.”

“He said that it was possible that for this kind of issue, your personal feelings might influence your decision.”

With a small smile, Bright responded, “He’s giving me more credit than I deserve, I’m afraid. I’ve always been very good at separating my personal feelings from my political judgment. It serves me well in politics, though in talking to you, it makes me uncomfortably aware of certain moral drawbacks.”

Harry's eyebrows narrowed. "You mean, in this case, you're not going to let your personal feelings influence your decision."

"That's right."

Even though he knew he should have expected the answer, Harry still had a hard time accepting it. "How can you say that?" he demanded, more incredulously than he meant to. "This isn't some question about regulations, or... or whatever, this is about whether or not we kill people! Killing people is supposed to be the worst thing we can do. How can you possibly think only about the politics of it?"

Bright sighed lightly, though he had clearly expected Harry's reaction. "I'm a politician' sounds like a sarcastic answer, but it's true. When we first met, I told you that—"

"That you would do what got you the most support, I remember," interrupted Harry, not thinking about the fact that he'd just interrupted the Minister of Magic. "But you could do this. Archibald tells me that with my help, you could stop it, and if things go wrong, any blame would go to me."

"When did you talk to him?" asked Bright.

"This morning, why?"

"Hogsmeade. Things have changed since this morning. In my little bubble here, I can't talk to people, but my assistants have. People have had it, they're boiling mad. They want something to be done—"

"They want revenge!" retorted Harry, raising his voice. "That's exactly why we shouldn't do this! It's totally the wrong reason! The fact that people escape is just an excuse to kill them, because people are mad." Harry paused, thinking, then spoke again. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I will anyway. I don't know if you've been told about what happened with Sirius..."

"He was killed in the Department of Mysteries by Bellatrix Lestrange, and he was innocent when he was sent to Azkaban," Bright supplied.

"Well, I don't know if they told you this, but he was very close to me, as close to a father as I'd ever had. I saw him get killed right in front of my eyes, and I

went out of my head. I chased down Lestrangle, she taunted me about what she'd done, and I tried to do the Cruciatus Curse on her." Bright's eyebrows went high, but he didn't interrupt. "I learned from that, that revenge doesn't accomplish anything. People won't feel better after the Death Eaters are executed. The relatives of the people who were killed won't feel any better. It won't bring their loved ones back."

Bright regarded Harry very seriously. "No, it won't. And it may not make them feel any better, but it might. What's true for you may not be true for everyone. But it will make them feel safer, and that's part of what this is about."

"Yes, but if we had caught these Death Eaters before they had done anything, or if they had killed people from some other country, nobody would be wanting them to be executed. Wanting revenge is most of what's causing this. You just said, they're mad. They want to feel safe, but they want someone punished more. It's just like what Voldemort did today. He's in pain, and he wants someone to suffer for it."

Bright spread his hands in a gesture of acknowledgment. "Human nature, Harry. I wasn't trying to argue the merits with you. Like I said, I agree with a lot of what you think. I was just telling you what the situation was out there, and why it may be difficult even for you to do anything to stop it. My training and experience always causes me to look first, and hard, at the reality of the situation. That's not to say I can't see the ethics of it, just that that's not where I look.

"And yes, you're right, it's not impossible that if I were determined I could stop it, especially with your help. And you're also right that killing is about the worst thing we can do as humans. But another thing that's really bad is letting people die. We can't be sure of holding the Death Eaters; that's an objective fact which we can't ignore. Part of what politics is about is the weighing of factors and making judgments."

"Based on political factors," said Harry.

"Mostly, yes," acknowledged Bright.

“Even when the political pressure you’re responding to is being made with about as much judgment as I used when I chased after Bellatrix Lestrange? If so, you’re letting a mob help make a decision for you.”

“Mobs are groups of citizens, Harry. They have to be listened to, just like everyone else. If they’re a mob, there’s a reason they became a mob, and that reason is a big part of what I’m responding to. The intensity of their anger reflects the damage that Death Eaters are doing to our society, and I have to respond to that too.”

“What would you do,” Harry challenged him, “if the politics of this were neutral?”

“Just so you know, as a rule, politicians would rather kill their first-born than answer hypothetical questions. But I’ll try to answer.” Bright paused, thinking; Harry couldn’t help but think that the very fact that Bright was pausing at all said a lot. “Honestly, I don’t know. I’d probably support it anyway, but it would be a harder decision. I never pretended that the politics didn’t matter. But I would be pretty torn, just like you are right now.” Harry’s eyebrows went up. “Yes, Harry, I’ve been checking you. You’re the most unlikely person I can think of to lie to me, but when anyone comes in here wanting me to do something incredibly risky, you’re damn right I’m going to be checking. You’re not lying to me about anything, but I can tell you’re ambivalent. You know what the right thing to do is, you just aren’t sure if that’s what you should do. You’re hoping for an ally, someone to fight the fight with you. Well, I’m sorry, but I can’t be that. I can’t be as idealistic as you. I know what the people put me here to do, and it isn’t to do the right thing, it’s to reflect their will. The more important the issue, the more important it is that I do that. This may not mean anything to you, but for me, for a politician, doing what the politics tells me to do is roughly the same thing as doing what you think is right is for you. It’s not exactly noble, but I do think it’s defensible.”

Harry said nothing for a minute after Bright stopped speaking, trying to calm himself. He was angry with Bright, but at the same time, he felt that he

shouldn't be, since he himself was conflicted. He could understand the general principle of following the will of the people; it just seemed to be a really bad idea in a case like this, where public anger could cause people to collectively act in terribly immoral ways. But then, he thought, who was he to be the judge of what was moral or what was not? Even Dumbledore had said that there was no absolute right and wrong, universally speaking. But this just seemed so obvious...

Calmer now, Harry looked at Bright in an almost pleading way. "It doesn't bother you that this is about revenge? It bothers me."

A small amount of uncertainty showed on Bright's face. "I'd much rather that had nothing to do with it. But if there are two reasons for doing a thing, a good reason and a bad reason, we shouldn't not do it just because the bad reason exists. If people support it for what we feel is the wrong reason, at least we can take solace in knowing that we supported it for the right reasons.

"If it makes you feel any better, Harry, I'm not totally sanguine about this. I'd rather not be the one in this office when the state put thirty-odd people to death. I just feel that this is what I should do, that the circumstances demand it. It makes it easier for me that the politics are what they are, but that aside, I just don't think I can bring myself to endanger lives to uphold a principle, no matter how important that principle is. I'd like to do the right thing. But I can't."

It dawned on Harry that there was no chance for him to change Bright's mind. "Archibald said that I might be able to stop it by myself. If I tried, would you fight me?"

Bright shook his head sadly. "No, I wouldn't. By the way, that was this morning; if you're serious, you need to talk to him again, Hogsmeade has changed things. You have a lot of clout, but it would be an uphill battle. But I wouldn't fight you. I have enough regard for you that I also wouldn't set myself up to benefit from your fall, though some in the Ministry would; they would know that your position was a likely loser in the long run, and oppose you now in anticipation of being proved right later, so they could score political points. If you did this, I'd just keep a

low profile, silently cheer you on, and pray that if you won, there were no more jailbreaks or massacres.”

“But you’re the Minister of Magic, wouldn’t you be the one making the final decision?”

“Sort of,” Bright agreed, “but I could, and would, do it in such a way that it was clear that I was responding to the wishes of the people, in this case, those who agreed with you. You would be trying to rally public opinion; my role would be almost that of an arbiter. I would be an impartial judge of whether you had done it or not; you would create the political change that I would be responding to. But I hope you won’t do it.”

“I thought you’d just as soon not see this happen,” Harry pointed out.

“Not for that reason,” Bright clarified. “But if there’s an escape and more killings—” He cut himself off as Harry nodded.

“Archibald and Professor McGonagall have already mentioned that,” he said. “I appreciate it. So, do I need to let you know if I’m going to do this? I mean, you’re going to have to announce your position soon, I’d guess.”

“If you do it, letting me know by tomorrow night would be good. Strictly speaking, politically, I should get out in front of this as soon as I can, since I can see where it’s going. Tomorrow’s Prophet will be full of quotes from Ministry people in loud support; I’ll hold off until Monday’s Prophet. Partly to give the appearance of thoughtful deliberation, and partly as a subtle signal of my discomfort with it. So... tomorrow night, by eight o’clock, let’s say, which is close to the Prophet’s deadline.”

Harry nodded, and after a few seconds, started to stand, assuming they were finished. Bright held up a hand, indicating that Harry shouldn’t go yet. Resuming his seat, Harry looked at Bright expectantly.

“Harry... maybe I shouldn’t say this, but somebody should, and I don’t know if anyone has. When we first met, I said you were leading the anti-Voldemort forces, and you found that a little difficult to accept. I have a feeling you may accept it now, but I’m wondering if you haven’t accepted it a bit too much.” Puzzled,

Harry wondered what Bright was talking about. “You’re acting as though this is only your decision to make. It’s not, it’s all of us. Yes, a lot of people will follow your lead, and you’ve earned that. But it doesn’t mean that you should necessarily ask them to, that you should substitute your judgment for theirs. And most importantly... if you choose not to fight this, you cannot think that you’re responsible, because you might have been able to stop it. If you do choose to fight it, and win, and there are more deaths, you can’t think you’re responsible for that, either. Just because you’re the one who’ll probably beat Voldemort doesn’t make you responsible for everything. This is not only about you.”

Harry still felt responsible, but found that Bright’s last comment had gotten to him. “Are you saying that my ego’s gotten too big?”

“Not ego in the sense of ‘look at me, I’m so great,’” clarified Bright. “But in a way, yes, at least you’ve come across that way when talking to me. Maybe, ego in the sense of self-importance. You are quite important, of course, so it would be understandable. I just think it’s a little worrisome that you’ve taken this issue upon yourself the way you have. Yes, it may be the greatest moral issue of our generation, and yes, we may be making a mistake. But that doesn’t make it yours to fix.”

Harry stared off into space, feeling as though he suddenly had too much to think about. He slowly nodded. “Well... I guess I should get going. Thanks for seeing me.”

“Any time,” said Bright.

* * * * *

Returning via the Burrow’s fireplace, Harry quickly explained to Arthur, Molly, Ginny, and Pansy what had happened, then went upstairs to lie down for a while. He entered the bedroom to find Ron looking through his trunk.

“So, how’d it go?”

Harry shook his head as he sat on his bed. Ron nodded, clearly not surprised. “I’d have been shocked if he’d said yes,” said Ron. “After you left, Dad was saying he thought it would be a miracle if you got Bright to oppose it. We talked about it a bit.”

“How do your parents feel about it?”

“About like you’d expect. Dad’s against it, Mum supports it. Neither is totally comfortable with what they think. But with this kind of thing, I feel like if you are totally sure, you’re not thinking about it very hard.”

“Bright’s totally sure, politically, just not morally,” reported Harry. “But he’s not going to let that stop him. From what you said at breakfast, I guess I don’t have to ask how you feel.”

Ron nodded solemnly. “Not that I’m happy about it, but yes, I’m okay with it. If I had any doubts at all, there’s one thing that puts it over the top for me.” Harry could see the emotion in Ron’s eyes that Ron was trying to keep off his face. “I don’t know if this has occurred to you specifically, but if this happens, Malfoy dies.”

Harry felt his own emotion rise as he understood Ron’s point: Malfoy had made threats against Pansy that he no doubt still wanted to make good on, and his death was the only way they could be sure that he never would. If he lived, Pansy had to spend the rest of her life wondering if Malfoy might one day escape, hunt her down, and somehow manage to abduct her without the others knowing. It was very unlikely, Harry knew, but not impossible, and that made it something to be taken very seriously.

“No, I hadn’t thought about it exactly like that,” admitted Harry, feeling ashamed that he hadn’t. “I can see why you would. I assume she agrees with you?”

“I think she does, but she hasn’t said so exactly. The one time I asked her, she didn’t give a direct answer, and changed the subject. Maybe she feels like she’s too close to it, I don’t know.”

Harry recalled that Pansy hadn't spoken up any time the topic of capital punishment had come up, and wondered if this was the reason. He thought about her, about the difference it would make to her life if Malfoy were no longer around. He knew that it didn't make killing the Death Eaters any more right, but he also knew he couldn't ignore it.

Ron looked at Harry, seeming indecisive about whether to say what he was going to say. Finally, emotion clear in both his voice and his eyes, he said, "Harry... she's had nightmares."

Harry winced internally, and closed his eyes. He knew he shouldn't be surprised, since he'd had nightmares about Cedric, and Voldemort returning, and what Pansy had gone through had been worse.

"Do you hope I won't fight this?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," said Ron. "But that wasn't why I told you that. I know how you feel about her. If I were you, thinking about this kind of decision, I'd want to know something like that."

"You're right, I would have wanted to know," agreed Harry. "Do you think Neville cares one way or the other what happens to LeStrange?"

"I don't think so," said Ron. "With him and her, that was just revenge, and I think he's over that, or at least, over it enough. But this isn't revenge, it's prevention."

Nodding, Harry suddenly realized that Pansy's situation had a certain basic similarity to the larger situation: revenge and protection from possible future harm were both possible motivating factors for wanting the Death Eaters to be killed, as well as in Pansy's situation. Pansy's was more direct and more dire, but it seemed to Harry that if he considered Pansy's protection essential enough to allow Malfoy to die, then he should feel that way about everyone.

Harry spent the rest of the afternoon with Ginny; he tried not to think about the Death Eater situation, but found it hard not to. He paid Kingsley a quick

visit before dinner, and found that the Aurors weren't taking an official position, but that a good deal of them had no problem with the Death Eaters being executed. "Losing the five yesterday was more than an emotional blow," Kingsley had explained to Harry. "Out of thirty-eight, five is a huge number to lose, and we're using a certain amount of manpower to keep the Death Eaters we're keeping. We can't be as effective as we'd like to be. Without that tying us down, we can do better."

He talked to Hermione and Neville, and confirmed that they both opposed the executions, though neither was able to say they did unreservedly. Ginny supported them mainly because it would make Harry and the Aurors safer. Fred and George came by for dinner, and Harry found that they supported them unreservedly. They brushed off Arthur's questions about morality, causing Harry to exchange glances with Ron and Hermione. Fortunately for Harry—he'd wanted everyone's opinion, but was becoming tired of the topic—Molly changed the subject quickly.

The next day after lunch, Harry took Fawkes over to Hogwarts. He found McGonagall at the teachers' table in the otherwise empty Great Hall, having a late lunch. "How's he doing?" he asked.

"It's hard to know, since of course this has never been done before," said McGonagall. "He is... very disoriented, and is in and out of pain. He has been sedated for some of the time, and asleep for much of the time, since he had not slept the night before. What is the disposition of the other part of him?"

"He wasn't there last night, Albus said he had rejoined himself."

"So, it was successful?" she asked, surprised. "We have seen no hint of that as yet."

"Maybe it's hard for him to get used to having his other half back, or maybe he just needs to recover more for it to happen. Can I see him?"

"Certainly. I was just finishing anyway." She stood, and he followed her out.

"Is he alone right now?" asked Harry.

“Mathilda is with him.” To his puzzled glance, she explained, “Healer Haspberg. I do not feel comfortable taking him to St. Mungo’s, as his condition is sufficiently rare, and... personal, that I wish as few people to know about it as possible, not to mention its connection to what you plan to do with Voldemort. It cannot be known.”

When they arrived at Snape’s quarters, he entered after her. They walked through the living area and entered the bedroom. “Minerva... ah, hello, Professor Potter.”

“Any change?” asked McGonagall.

“Not really. He’s been mostly staring off into space for the past hour, which is better than when he’s not.” To Harry, she continued, “Minerva has explained all this to me, though not thoroughly, since she tells me that even you can’t quite say completely what you did. I’ve been trying to help him stay comfortable, since that’s about all I can do. When he’s not staring off into space, he’s usually in pain, and sometimes babbling. About Professor Dumbledore, you, Voldemort, Minerva, and so on. The pain is... the best way I can describe it is that it’s as if he’s doing something, touching something, then cries in pain and backs away. Not physically, of course, but that is what it sounds like when he does it.”

“Maybe he’s trying to approach positive memories, and finding that they still cause him pain,” suggested McGonagall.

Harry frowned. “I don’t know, but it really felt like I did what I should have done. I thought I undid everything Voldemort did. But maybe I didn’t do it enough, it’s just impossible to know.”

“Well, Harry, oddly enough, you’re the Healer here,” said McGonagall wryly. “No offense,” she added to Haspberg.

“None taken, of course,” Haspberg assured her.

Shaking his head, Harry said, “I’m not sure what to do.” He thought for a minute. “I know one thing to do that’s safe. I’ll do Legilimency on him, check to see

what it is he's seeing when he does this, when he just stares." He pointed his wand at Snape and cast Legilimens.

Two minutes later, he lowered his wand. "What he's doing is viewing old memories, memories of Albus's. But it seems different; I've seen people remembering memories before. It's like, he's totally absorbed in the memory, and isn't aware of anything else. I guess that's why it seems to us that he's staring off into space."

"Why is he doing that?" wondered McGonagall. "Because it's safe?"

"I think so," said Harry. "If I had to guess—and I suppose I do—I'd say that his 'other half' has joined him, but when he goes into his regular consciousness, he feels the pain that Voldemort programmed him to feel if his other half was there. So, I must not have gotten all of it. But the strange thing is, why would his other half have joined him, if his mind wasn't ready for it? Did his other half think I was successful, and I wasn't? Because obviously I wasn't."

"Can we be sure of that?" asked Haspberg.

"The pain he experiences when not viewing memories would seem to indicate that," said McGonagall, "but again, this is so unprecedented, one cannot make any assumptions of any sort."

"There's one way we can find out for sure," said Harry, reluctantly. "I can do the Imperius Charm on him. If I was successful, it shouldn't hurt him. If there's still stuff there, it'll cause him pain. Do you think I should do it?"

McGonagall and Haspberg exchanged blank expressions. "As Minerva said, you are the Healer here. Sometimes Healers have to do things that cause pain in order to get information. If there is no other way to know, then you should do it."

Regretfully, he said, "I'm pretty sure there's no other way to know, so I guess I'd better do it." He leaned over a little toward Snape. "Professor Snape, I'm going to do the Imperius Charm now." Still in what appeared to be a trance, Snape gave no reaction whatsoever to Harry's warning. Hoping for the best, Harry applied the Imperius Charm.

Snape's reaction was immediate: he screamed in pain, in a way roughly similar to how he had when Harry had done it to him in early September.

Frustrated, Harry withdrew the Charm. "Dammit," he exclaimed.

"It is not your fault," said McGonagall softly.

"Do you have any ideas about what to do next?" asked Haspberg.

"I don't see much choice but to do what I did yesterday, again," said Harry, resigned. "I guess it's hard to know just how much to do at once. But I still can't figure out why his other half came back if this wasn't totally done."

"Perhaps the other half felt that you needed a way to know when the procedure was truly done, and he knew that he could take refuge in the memories until such a time as that was done," suggested McGonagall.

"I thought the way I would know it was truly done was when the other half came back," said Harry. "But that seems like the best guess right now. Healer Haspberg, is there something you can give him to put him out? He doesn't need to be conscious when I do this."

Haspberg waved her wand, and Snape's eyes closed. "He should be unconscious for about an hour," she said.

"This shouldn't take that long," said Harry as he sat in the chair next to the bed. "I'm not going to do it for as long as I did yesterday." He cast Legilimens, and began.

Sitting at the teachers' table in the Great Hall, Harry looked out into the audience. Over two hundred people faced him and the others; the tables had been moved out of the Hall, and chairs conjured. Six Aurors lined the walls of the Hall, along with Neville and Ron, in their Auror robes. Harry knew that several more were patrolling the Hogwarts grounds on brooms. Hogwarts had been chosen as the site for the meeting not because Hogwarts was the topic, but because of its security.

McGonagall introduced Harry and the other teachers present, then gave an opening statement, which took about five minutes. She explained the magical defenses which protected Hogwarts, and assured the parents that all possible measures were being taken to ensure their children's safety. Harry felt that the speech was short on specifics, but he knew that the parents would be asking for more details.

She opened the floor to questions, and a few dozen hands went up. We're going to be here for a while, thought Harry. She pointed at a man, who stood. "I'm Anton Rosenthal, Daniel's father," he announced. "Let me ask the obvious question first: If Hogwarts is so safe, how did five assassins gain access to the castle?"

"As I have explained in the Daily Prophet, Ministry guidelines state that no information regarding our knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of Death Eater methods may be released publicly. I will simply say that the castle is safe."

"Is it more safe, less safe, or as safe as it was ten days ago?" he challenged her.

"I am very sorry, but I have said all I can say in response to your question," she answered, giving him a look that Harry knew well, the one that meant 'you should know better than to ask.' Obviously unconvinced, Rosenthal resumed his seat.

She gestured to a middle-aged woman, who stood. "If you have to choose between the students' safety and what's best in the battle with... the Death Eaters and their leader, which will you choose?" she asked, a little nervously. Harry realized that she was nervous not because of McGonagall, but because she had considered saying Voldemort's name and... chickened out, thought Harry uncharitably. Clearly not everyone was saying Voldemort's name yet.

"I do not accept that there must be a conflict between the two," said McGonagall. "But I will tell you that the protection of Hogwarts students is my top priority."

Standing as he spoke, not waiting to be called on, a man said, “But you tried to send Harry away when the assassins attacked, and he ended up being the one to catch them. If you were thinking of the students first, wouldn’t you have made sure he stayed?”

“Hindsight is all very well,” she said irritably, seeming to be making an effort to hide her irritation, and failing. “In the moment, it was clear who their target was; it did not seem out of line to get him to safety. Yes?”

A blond-haired man who looked no older than thirty-five, but Harry assumed must have been older, stood. “My name is Edward Creevey; all three of my children attend this school. We are told—and as you may be aware, my wife and I are what you call ‘Muggles,’ so some of this is rather new to us—we are told by our children that there is a new type of magical energy based on love, which they all are not far from mastering. They also told us, somewhat reluctantly, that those who manifest that ability are targeted by this Voldemort wizard who threatens your world, and whose hand... er, well, never mind.” Some chuckles spread through the Hall, and Harry couldn’t help but glance over at Hermione, who gave him a quick grin. “My question is, Professor Potter, should they manifest this ability, exactly how much danger will they be in?”

Harry could sympathize; he imagined that the situation would be confusing for Muggles, and with all three of his children there... “First of all, Mr. Creevey, did your children explain the priority that Voldemort instructed the assassins—”

Harry cut himself off as Creevey nodded. “Yes, they did. But another thing, why was that information not printed in that magical newspaper?”

“The tactic was clearly designed to intimidate students into not learning the energy of love,” explained McGonagall. “It was decided that we would do best not to assist Voldemort in his attempts at intimidation by spreading it ourselves. The news spread throughout the school quickly, in any case.”

“To answer the question,” added Harry, “the more people there are who can do it, the less danger there is for each one. For the ones right now, we think he’s

highly unlikely to target them individually, but protection has been arranged for them anyway.”

Halfway back, along the right side, Winston stood. “Excuse me, I’m Winston Clark. I’m an Auror, but am here today as a parent. You may know that my daughter Helen is one of the three who can do the spells; she’s told me about your situation. If your child, any child, becomes able to do the spells, you’ll get a visit from an Auror to discuss security arrangements.” Harry noticed that Winston didn’t mention that the security arrangements were as much for the parents as the children; he could definitely understand why Winston didn’t mention it. “Honestly, it’s more in the nature of a precaution than anything else.”

Looking somewhat, though not completely, reassured, Creevey sat down. McGonagall found another questioner, and gestured to a dark-skinned man near the back. “I am Rajiv Patil, father of twin seventh-year daughters. My question is also for Professor Potter. Part of your curriculum for your Defense Against the Dark Arts classes is combat flying.” This prompted some whispering and quiet comments; apparently many parents had not known. “My daughters have said that you are teaching it in anticipation of a possible attack on the castle. My question is, do you not think that’s quite a risky thing even for seventh years to be doing?”

Harry could see that many parents were surprised, and realized that he had to calm most of them down. “First of all, I’m only teaching it to the sixth and seventh years; I wasn’t thinking that anyone younger than seventeen would join the battle, if there is one. Secondly, I’m not urging anyone to join; people are completely welcome to return to the common rooms, or whatever place students may be sent.”

He was going to continue, but Patil cut him off. “I think you are deliberately misunderstanding me, Professor. I know they can choose not to fight. I am saying that your teaching it may cause many to do so where they would not have otherwise.”

Harry couldn't deny that that was probably true, so he decided not to address the point directly. He suddenly had an idea. "Excuse me, everyone. I'm going to ask a question, and I'd like a show of hands. If, during your seventh year at Hogwarts, there had been an attack on the castle, how many of you would have tried to get a broom and go help out?" Harry held his breath as hands slowly went up; he knew he would look bad if very few did. After ten seconds, to Harry's relief, many hands were up.

"About half. That's about what I thought for this class, too. I was concerned that people might do that, but not know what to do once they got out there. I'm not saying people should join; I've made it clear to every class that it isn't something I expect, or especially want. I want everyone to be safe. But for those who want to, like those of you who raised your hands, I want them to be prepared."

A parent near Patil asked him, "Do your daughters want to join?"

Patil nodded. "Yes, both do. I'd rather they didn't, of course, but I know that I can't stop them. I'm proud that they want to, but... well, you are all parents, you know how I feel about it."

This prompted more comments, and another nearby person spoke, standing as he did. "Well, I for one think it's an excellent idea," said a dark-haired man with a thick mustache. "John Andrew Macmillan, father of Ernie, Head Boy of Hogwarts. I applaud Professor Potter's foresight and initiative. We must all fight the forces of darkness, especially when they arrive on one's doorstep." The comment prompted no further reaction, and McGonagall scanned the audience again. She motioned to a man near the front.

He stood. "I'm Raymond Turpin, father of Ellen, a Ravenclaw fifth year. My question is for Professor Potter. I wondered whether you thought it might be a good idea for you to take a sabbatical."

"I'm sorry, a what?"

“A long break,” Turpin explained. “My thought was that if you weren’t at Hogwarts, the Death Eaters’ attention wouldn’t be so focused in that direction, and my... remaining daughter would be safer.”

Harry winced internally; even if he hadn’t seen the accusation in Turpin’s eyes, he would have understood it from the question. Before he could answer, McGonagall cut in. “Professor Potter is a student here, and has as much right to attend as anyone else.”

“I wasn’t questioning his rights, just wondering if he thought it might be a good idea,” responded Turpin, with a stony stare at McGonagall. “And my question was directed to him, not you.”

Harry’s emotions were in turmoil; he felt as if he had been accused, in front of two hundred people, of responsibility for the deaths that had taken place at Hogwarts since last year. Since becoming a teacher, he had never felt any difficulty in speaking before large audiences... until now. He remembered Hogsmeade, he remembered the bodies of the Slytherins slumped over the sofas and chairs of their common room. He stared, feeling that he didn’t know what to say.

He had a sudden feeling of calm, of confidence, and realized it was from Hermione. It’s not your fault, she sent him. He’s grieving, but that doesn’t mean it was your fault. Realize what he’s going through, and just answer honestly.

Repressing an impulse to look down the table at Hermione, he sent her a feeling of appreciation. He still felt distressed, but with a perspective he hadn’t had a few seconds ago. “No. I don’t think it would be a good idea.”

“You don’t think my daughter would be safer?”

After a brief pause, Harry replied, “She might be, in the short run. But she wouldn’t be, in the long run. We all wouldn’t be. Doing that would only encourage Voldemort to intimidate other parts of society. We have to have better security, but as much as we can, do what we would normally do.”

Anger in his voice, Turpin said, “Excuse me, Professor, but right now I don’t care about encouraging him, or about other parts of society. I want to make sure I don’t lose another daughter.”

The very last thing Harry wanted to do was publicly argue with a parent who had lost a child at Hogwarts, but he felt he had to rebut the notion that he should leave Hogwarts. He could feel Hermione still supporting him, sending him feelings of calm and love. “Sir, do you think that I should have left Hogwarts?” Turpin nodded. “When?” asked Harry.

“Before my daughter died,” said Turpin sharply.

Again wincing slightly inside at the accusation, Harry nevertheless continued toward the point he was trying to make. “So, I assume you also think I never should have urged the students to say Voldemort’s name. None of this would have ever happened if I hadn’t done that. Is that right?”

Looking a little uncertain, Turpin nodded again. “But if I hadn’t done that, I would never have discovered the energy of love, which has turned out to be something he’s extremely vulnerable to. It’s going to be what defeats him. We have to fight him, wherever we are. I happen to be here.”

“You might feel differently,” shot back Turpin, “if you had lost a child.”

The words were out of Harry’s mouth before he knew it. “If you think I haven’t—” He paused suddenly, realizing his voice was about to break. In the absolute silence, he took a breath, then continued, “...suffered enormously for everyone who’s died here, then you’re very wrong. And I’ve lost people too. Professor Dumbledore, my godfather... not to mention my parents, you might have heard about that.” He immediately felt a pang of regret for being snippy with a grieving father, but he thought he had a good point. “We’re all in this together, Mr. Turpin. If we start ducking our heads down because he attacks us, or kills people around us, he wins. There’s nothing to do but fight back. I know it’s horrible, but that’s the way it is.”

“A different standard should apply to places where there are many children,” insisted Turpin, clearly unimpressed.

“This is one of the safest places in the wizarding world,” said McGonagall. “The fact that the assassins managed to get in simply points up the fact that Voldemort is very resourceful. At this point, Professor Potter leaving is out of the question. The school is a safer place with him than without him, and there are other targets for Voldemort here as well. You know that all students who have learned to use the energy of love were targets of that attack; should they be required to leave? Or me, for that matter, because I have publicly opposed him and worked against him? And we should not forget that Hogwarts would, with its defenses, be an ideal base of operations for the Death Eaters, and would be a target in any case.

“Hogwarts is an important part of our society,” she continued, now addressing the whole Hall, not just Turpin. “It cannot be separated from the rest of it so easily. It is the formative place for our future citizens, our future leaders. I would not like to think of it as a place where we teach our future citizens to hide from danger, to not speak out, to not call evil by its name.”

“No, much better that it’s a place where children are killed,” responded Turpin bitterly. Turning to face the other parents, he raised his voice and asked, “Is there anyone here whose child was killed, like mine was, who agrees with what they’re saying?”

There was a silence, then a woman with long, black hair stood. “I have a third-year daughter; my son, then a third year, was one of the four killed in the attack on Hogsmeade last Halloween,” she began, at first speaking slowly and nervously; Harry guessed that she’d never spoken in front of so many people before. “Mr. Turpin, you obviously think that Professors Potter and McGonagall can’t understand your grief, even though they’ve both lost people close to them. Believe me, I can. I admit, when my son was killed, at first I blamed Professor Potter, as you clearly do now.” Listening, Harry felt his chest tighten. *Albus said they didn’t blame me!* “But over time, I realized that they’re right. Everything Harry’s done

has been the right thing to do. I agree that children should be safe, and I pray that nothing happens to my daughter. But I'd rather accept this kind of risk than have them grow up in a world, as all our children have, where they had to be afraid to say any particular wizard's name. There's something very wrong with that."

To Harry's surprise, a few people applauded, and it grew to soon include what he guessed was more than three-quarters of the parents in the Hall. He was gratified at the support, and felt that the most pointed of the questioning was probably over. He struggled to keep his concentration on the proceedings, and off the thing that disturbed him most.

At the end of the meeting, Harry wanted nothing more than to go to his quarters and sit alone for a while. He couldn't, though, because McGonagall had asked all the attending teachers to remain near the exits and chat briefly with departing parents. Never fond of that kind of activity, Harry gamely did so anyway, Hermione at his side. Most of the comments were complimentary. Harry assured Mr. Creevey that his children would be fine, and asked him to say hello.

Harry was approached by a witch with short, light brown hair. "Professor, I'm Maya Abbott," she said, shaking Harry's hand. "I was very impressed with what you said. May I ask you a question?" Harry nodded. "This seemed a bit off the topic of the meeting, but I would very much like to know, how do you feel about the executions that are being planned?"

A few parents who seemed to have been on their way out paused, interested to see how he answered the question. Not this, not now, he thought, but he knew he had to say something. "I, um, I don't know what I'm going to do about that."

Abbott looked sympathetic, apparently noticing his reluctance, but pressed her question anyway. "I didn't ask you what you would do, Professor. I asked you how you felt."

He sighed, knowing that his answer was unlikely to please her. "What I feel, is that killing is wrong, whether we do it or the Death Eaters do it."

To his surprise, her eyes lit up. “I’m very glad to hear you say that,” she enthused. “I think this is wrong, too, but I’ve been having a hard time finding people who feel the same way—”

“I should bloody well hope so,” snapped a man nearby. “After all they’ve done? I live in Hogsmeade, I know some of the people who were just killed.” To Harry, he demanded, “You don’t think they should pay for what they’ve done?”

“Of course I do,” he answered, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice. “I’d just rather we didn’t kill them. I know there are good reasons, I just said how I felt.”

“If we don’t do this, it means we’re not serious about the Death Eaters,” the man said to Abbott. “We might as well authorize them for every fireplace in the country, let them do what they want. How many more people have to die before we do something?”

“Ethics are not situational,” she retorted with distaste. “It’s never all right to steal, it’s never all right to torture. And it’s never all right to kill. At least Harry understands that.”

Harry opened his mouth to respond, but the man spoke first. “Is your child here a son or a daughter?”

“Hannah, she’s a seventh-year prefect,” said Ms. Abbott proudly.

“And if you had to kill someone or watch them kill Hannah, what would you do?” the man asked.

“I reject the premise of the question—”

“Because you don’t want to answer it,” finished the man. “Accept it or not, that’s the situation we’re in. Or do you not agree with that?” he challenged Harry.

Harry took a deep breath. “No, I do agree, that’s almost exactly our situation.”

“And if someone was going to kill her?” he prompted, gesturing to Hermione.

“Because of the energy of love, I don’t know if I’m capable, literally, of killing. But I would do whatever it took to protect her, whether it was wrong or not.” The man nodded in satisfaction. To Abbott, Harry said, “The cost of doing the right thing in this situation would probably be very high, we have to admit that. I just don’t know if I can deal with paying it. I’ve seen too many innocent people die already. Excuse me.” With most of the parents already having left the Hall, Harry headed for the teachers’ table.

By the time he got there, the last of the parents had gone. He sat at the table and put his head in his hands. He felt overwhelmed, drained. After a minute, he felt a hand gripping his shoulder, and he didn’t have to look to know who it was. Without looking, he patted the hand on his shoulder. He looked up to say something, and gave a start as he saw McGonagall looking down at him.

She chuckled gently at his reaction. “You thought it was Hermione. Understandable, don’t worry about it.” She took a seat next to him, hand still on his shoulder. “I know that was very difficult for you.”

He nodded. “That’s putting it mildly. Next time, I won’t be so quick to volunteer for something like this.”

“I was surprised that you did,” she agreed. “I did warn you, though perhaps not enough. Archibald was right, you certainly did take the pressure off of me. Unfortunately, it went straight to you, and I think you are barely in a position to deal with more than you already have.”

He thought about Dumbledore, and the sadness came back to him again. “Minerva,” he said quietly, “did you know he lied to me about that?”

With a small, sympathetic smile, she met his eyes and said, “You must really be upset, to call me ‘Minerva.’” She moved her hand off his shoulder and took his left hand. “I wasn’t with him when he met the relatives that day. I do not know for a fact that he lied; perhaps she did not communicate that to him at that time.”

Getting an impression, Harry concentrated for a few seconds. “No, he did lie. He just sent me... I think it was what he was feeling at the time. Sadness, he was

so sad... for the relatives, for me.” He unconsciously gripped McGonagall’s hand a little harder. “It’s amazing, communicating this way. It just took a second for me to get what he sent me, but it would probably take a few minutes to say it, and words wouldn’t say it as well. He knew I would blame myself, he was afraid I wouldn’t be able to handle it, the responsibility I’d feel. He needed me to get through it, I was precarious enough as it was. He chose to save me from the pain I’d feel then if I found out, at the cost of what I feel now. I also get the feeling that he felt that he knew they wouldn’t really blame me once they recovered from their grief, so what he said wasn’t really that untrue.”

“I can very much understand why he did it, Harry. I probably would have done the same.”

Harry nodded, staring ahead into the empty Hall. “It helps a lot for him to have sent what he did. It’s good for empathy, to be able to feel just what someone else was feeling. He felt bad about lying to me, even though it was to help me. He hated to do it.”

“I can well imagine,” she agreed. “He was always honest, to a fault. In this case, being honest would have been more of a fault.”

They sat in silence for a minute, then Harry’s five friends filed in and walked up to the teachers’ table. “How are you doing?” asked a concerned Ginny.

“A little better, thanks,” he said. Knowing they had come to get him, he asked McGonagall, “Should I go look in on Professor Snape?”

She shook her head. “I’ll go relieve Mathilda. I’ll let you know if there’s anything that seems to require your attention, but in the meantime, let’s give it another day before we think about you doing anything more.”

He squeezed her hand again before letting go of it and standing. “Thanks.” He met his friends at the end of the table, took Ginny’s hand, and followed them out.

At the Burrow, Harry relaxed by half-sitting, half-lying on the sofa, Ginny in his arms. The others were in and out of the living room; nobody talked much about the aspect of the meeting that had affected Harry, but they traded impressions of the parents, most of whom they had never met. “Now, I don’t wonder anymore how Ernie got like he is,” remarked Ron at one point. “Tallyho, and all that.”

“He wouldn’t be like that if he’d seen half of the stuff we’ve seen,” said Neville confidently. “There’s something about grim reality that takes away that kind of...”

“Bravado?” suggested Hermione.

Neville nodded. “Yes, thanks. I always know that if I pause long enough, you’ll come up with the word I want.”

“If you’ve said enough of the sentence that I can guess,” she said.

Molly came through the fireplace; she had been gone since the meeting, which she had attended. She walked over to Harry, leaned over, and kissed the top of his head. “I’m never promising you anything again,” she mock-scolded him, referring to his earlier insistence that she not stand up to defend him if he was criticized. “It just killed me to have to sit there and listen to that. And the people around me, they were looking at me as if to say, isn’t she going to say something?”

“But it wouldn’t have looked good, a professor and Head of House’s mother getting up to defend him,” he pointed out. He knew that she understood that he meant that she was a mother figure to him, and was perceived that way. “And, people would have assumed anything you said was for that reason.”

“And, if someone you love is being attacked like that, you don’t care,” she chided him. “You should know. If someone was saying those things to Ginny, you’d forget about any promises you’d made.” Harry nodded in acknowledgment. “I just felt so bad, none of us could do anything to help you.”

“Hermione could. As soon as Turpin basically said I was responsible for Lisa’s death, she started sending... emotional reinforcement, I guess you’d call it.” He looked over at her with appreciation.

“I had a feeling, I was going to ask at some point,” said Neville. “I would have been surprised if you weren’t. It was so unfair, it seemed like he set up the question just so he could say what he wanted to say, that Harry was responsible. I’m glad you were able to do that.”

“Me, too,” added Ginny. Harry squeezed Ginny, glad that she wasn’t bothered by the use of the phoenixes as she had been before. She reached up and kissed his cheek, then snuggled into his shoulder.

“Let’s just hope there won’t be any more of those meetings,” said Molly.

A while later, Pansy got up and went upstairs. Having been looking for a chance to talk to her alone, Harry went up a few minutes later. He found her in the girls’ bedroom. He stuck his head in the door, asking, “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure,” she said, gesturing him to the bed next to hers. “I bet I know what it’s about. I think I’m the only one you haven’t talked to yet.”

“Didn’t happen to find you alone. So, what would you do if you were me?”

“Go to Diagon Alley and let myself be fawned over and told how good I am, maybe sign a few autographs,” she joked. Turning serious, she said, “Oh, Harry, I’m really not comfortable with the idea of influencing your decision.”

“Join the club, I’m not comfortable with the idea of making it,” he half-joked. “But I’m stuck with it, so I want your help.”

“I just... I don’t feel like I can give an unbiased opinion,” she admitted. “The thing with Malfoy shouldn’t matter to it—”

“Of course it matters,” he interjected.

“But if killing people is wrong, and you’re right about that, then it shouldn’t matter.”

“But it does, though,” he said firmly. “It’s like a personal reminder of what I could be doing. If I risk other people’s lives by doing this, I have to risk yours as well. If I were Albus, I probably would. But one thing I’ve discovered lately is that

I'm not Albus. It can't not matter to me, I can't not consider it. And I still want to know what you think."

Pansy sighed in surrender. "I would let them be killed, and I wouldn't lose any sleep over it. You may not be Albus, but you're a lot closer to being him than I am. I feel bad about it, but I can't let the principle bother me that much. And... I'd make the same choice whether they had Malfoy or not, but—and some part of me isn't happy that I feel this way—the fact that this would mean his death makes it more appealing to me."

Harry could see in her eyes her discomfort at feeling that way. "I don't think anyone would blame you for that. What you went through, what you still could... I remember thinking before, after Easter, that the only way you could ever have real peace of mind was if he died, and now, here it is, that very situation."

"And, to make it worse, you get a say in whether it happens or not," she said. "I don't envy you."

"Me neither," he agreed. "And that's why I need to know what you all think. I guess it makes me feel less alone."

"You're never alone," she assured him. "Hermione was right, you're never alone." His eyebrows shot up; he wondered whether she meant what he thought she meant. She noticed his reaction. "Yes, she told me, both about that and what happened the next day. It was really sweet of her."

He nodded, remembering. "It really was. It was like she was lying next to me, holding me, comforting me... but even better than that. The feelings, when you get them directly like that..."

"She also told me about what happened that day, the day we found out about Blaise, and what you did to make her feel better. She was so amazed, she didn't know the power it could have. I have to admit, I'm a little envious, and it doesn't even involve Ron or I in any way. You know, you really want to be careful what you say to Ginny."

"Do you think I shouldn't have said what I said down there?"

Pansy shook her head. “No, that was exactly the situation where she should do that, and I’m sure Ginny was sincere in what she said. It’s just that, as you know, it’s very sensitive. I’ve talked to Ginny about this, too. Since I’m the one not involved, I hear about it from both of them, but it’s hard for them to talk to each other; there’s too much possibility of a problem. You probably know this, but Ginny feels bad that she feels the way she does about it. She does her best to be understanding, but she can’t help being frustrated about this sometimes. And you know, Harry... if I were in her position, I’d feel exactly the same way. You should never be mad at her for feeling the way she does.”

“I’m not,” he said, sad that Ginny was unhappy in a way he couldn’t do anything to change. “Do you think that not telling her about what Hermione did that night was the right thing to do?”

“Yes,” said Pansy immediately, her tone suggesting that the answer was obvious. “I think the less you tell her about this, the better.”

“I’m just afraid it’ll seem like I’m trying to hide things from her.”

“I can understand that, but I think she’ll understand the reason.”

“But, remember... oh, wait, you didn’t see that. Back at the end of June, when Snape accepted me as the person to replace Albus, he gave me permission to tell Ginny because he saw that it would make my life really difficult if he didn’t. When she found out, Ginny was unhappy at the idea that she wouldn’t have been told, even though it would have been easier for her not to know.”

“That’s a different situation,” argued Pansy. “In that case, it was a difficulty of yours that she could help you with, and she didn’t feel bad about being unhappy that your memories would be viewed. Here, it’s not a challenge for you; there’s nothing she could do to help you, and she feels bad at being upset. Telling her every time it happens may be honest, but it would be unnecessarily hurtful.”

He nodded; he still didn’t like it, but he couldn’t argue with her. Curious, he asked, “How are things going with you and Ron?”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s told you all about everything,” she joked.

“Yes, you know how he loves talking about relationships,” Harry responded with a smile.

“He does better with me, actually,” she said. “I think he knows he has to, and he doesn’t seem to mind. But we’re doing fine. There’s no problems, or at least, nothing serious.” With a gleam in her eyes, she added, “We’re looking forward to spending some time together during the vacation. Which reminds me... Ron would never ask you, but you mentioned having a copy of your Ring of Reduction. Maybe as a little project, you could modify the second room, like you talked about.”

Harry chuckled. “That sounds like a good idea. It would be a nice distraction.”

“I think Ginny has other ideas for your distraction,” teased Pansy. “But thanks. And the sooner the better, we don’t have that much vacation left.”

“I’ll get right on it,” he assured her. “And... thanks, for everything.”

“Anytime you want to talk, I’m here.”

He left, then went to the boys’ bedroom and lay on the bed. Thinking about the executions, he found that his mind was 99% made up: he was almost certain that he would decide to do nothing to stop them. He knew that Turpin was grieving, but not totally wrong: Harry did attract danger wherever he went. Those people could easily escape, and he knew he would feel responsible for whatever they did if that happened. He also felt that the man who had argued with Maya Abbott had a good point, that it was more or less a choice between the lives of the Death Eaters and the lives of their future victims. Albus would have done this, thought Harry, he would have led a crusade to stop it. But I don’t think I can. I know he said I had to make my own decisions, but I hate this one. They’re both terrible. And I do feel like I have blood on my hands if I let this go forward. Everyone will tell me I shouldn’t feel like that, but I do. I know Bright said it’s not all about me, and he’s right. But the fact is that I might be able to stop it. Could I look those people in the eye and tell them that I agreed to their death? He realized that there was one more thing he had to do before he could stop thinking about the situation.

Harry walked down the halls of the Auror compound; Kingsley had given him directions, even though he had been there once before. The prisoners' cells were spread apart to keep them from communicating, even though they were usually Silenced as a matter of course. Harry turned right, and was soon at the cell he remembered.

He stood in front of the cell and saw the figure lying on the simple bed, pointing away from him. He lifted the Silencing, and spoke. "Hello, Malfoy."

Malfoy sat up with a start; Harry knew that it was probably very rare for him to hear anyone speak. "P— Potter?" he asked, as he turned on his bed to face Harry. His voice cracked a little, as Harry also knew that Malfoy might not have spoken for a long time. "Is that you, or..." Malfoy's eyes narrowed, as if trying to make out some tiny detail.

Harry realized what Malfoy was thinking. "No, it's really me, sorry. Not a Death Eater posing as me, here to break you out. I just wanted to talk."

Malfoy looked at Harry as if he were crazy. "Just came by for a chat, did you?" he asked sarcastically. "Wanted to gloat a bit?"

Harry almost laughed, since that was so far from his purpose. "No," he said. "Maybe I'm here to say goodbye."

"You going somewhere?" sneered Malfoy. "Never to return, I hope?"

"No, it's more like, you're going somewhere," said Harry somberly. "But you will return, according to Professor Dumbledore." On seeing Malfoy's blank yet contemptuous look, Harry realized that Malfoy didn't know. "I forgot, you don't exactly get the Prophet in here. The Ministry is about to decide that all the Death Eaters currently being held are going to be put to death."

Malfoy laughed. "Yeah, tell me another one. The Ministry's way too spineless to do anything like that. They'll be breaking us out any day now."

"They did try, in September," conceded Harry. "Voldemort himself led the attempt, you should be flattered. But we stopped them. Some people have escaped

since you got caught, but you're being held by Aurors." Harry went on to explain in brief the events of the past few months. "So, there have been enough escapes that people are getting fed up with it, they're ready to do anything they have to, to stop it. There's a lot of pressure from the public to execute the Death Eaters we have right now, and it's going to happen, maybe pretty soon. Probably within the next two weeks."

Malfoy was silent for a minute, then looked defiant, "I don't believe you."

"Yes, you do," said Harry; he had been checking since he arrived. "You don't want to, but you do. You can't think of any reason why I'd bother to come in here and lie to you."

Malfoy rolled his eyes in annoyance. "Just because I can't think of a reason doesn't mean there isn't one. And I'm not worried, they'll come and break us out before anything could happen anyway. The Dark Lord won't allow this."

Harry gave a grunt of amusement. "The Dark Lord isn't in much of a position to do anything, he can't even conduct a simple operation competently." He proceeded to explain what he had done to Voldemort; despite Malfoy's attempts to appear as if he dismissed what Harry was saying, he looked stunned. "Hogsmeade, the one this year, was the last straw," concluded Harry. "They lost the artifact, and created enough public anger that the executions will happen."

"Now I'm sure you're lying," said Malfoy smugly. "No one could do that to the Dark Lord, certainly not you."

Harry found that Malfoy wasn't lying. "Not that it matters, but I can show you what I did." Malfoy blanched, as Harry had explained that what he did was very painful. "No, I'm not going to show you by doing it... not exactly." With a wave of his wand, Harry lifted the Memory Charm he had placed on Malfoy in September. Malfoy gave a start as the memories came flooding back; horror filled his eyes as he clearly realized that Harry was telling the truth.

Harry explained how he had come up with the Imperius Charm, and its effect on Death Eaters. "Doing it to you, and what happened, made me realize that

it would have the same effect on Voldemort, or anyone who'd been Cleansed. Yes, I know about that," he added, to another startled look from Malfoy. "When I do it much more intensely, with Legilimency, it basically reverses the Cleansing. By the time I get done with Voldemort, he'll barely be able to have an evil thought, never mind do anything." Harry wasn't sure that that was literally true, but suspected that it might be.

Malfoy remained silent, but it was very plain that he was very frightened, knowing that if Harry wasn't lying about the rest of it, he wasn't lying about the executions, or about Voldemort's current mental capacity. "I'm wondering, Malfoy... if you could have the Cleansing reversed, would you?"

Anger took over Malfoy's face. "Why are you here, Potter?" he snapped. "You didn't just come to say goodbye. Why don't you just do whatever you came here to do and get the hell out." Harry realized that Malfoy felt that he was being toyed with; Harry wondered if he actually was, despite it not being his intention.

Harry almost said, 'Anxious to get back to whatever it was you were doing?' but decided at the last second that it would be gloating, which he didn't want to do. "I've kind of done it already. I know this isn't going to make any sense to you, Malfoy, but since I've taken up your valuable time, I'll explain it anyway." Harry found he couldn't quite hold back that comment. "I have a lot of influence, and not everyone agrees that we should be killing people. If I tried really hard, I might be able to get them to not do this. I think killing people is wrong, and we shouldn't do it. But I'm not going to fight it, I'm going to let it happen. So I feel kind of responsible, like I'm helping condemn you and the others to death by not doing anything. I felt like if I'm going to do that, I should be able to come here, look you in the eye, and tell you that."

Confusion was dominant on Malfoy's face, followed by anger, an emotion that Harry realized was almost always there, as it was with Snape. "That's got to be the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

Harry shrugged. "I told you you wouldn't understand it. You'd have to have a conscience to do that, and I'm not sure you ever had one even before you were Cleansed."

"Conscience is for the weak," spat Malfoy. "The strong survive."

"Which explains why you're here," retorted Harry. "You wouldn't be here if you hadn't decided to go after Dudley. He says hello, by the way, he thinks about you now and then. He bought steel-toed shoes in case he ever runs into you again." Harry decided on the spur of the moment to gloat for a minute on Dudley's behalf. "Anyway, you did what you wanted to do instead of what you were supposed to do, which isn't exactly a sign of strength. You're not strong, Malfoy. You were just born with advantages, like money and power... and one big disadvantage. Like Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott, you were born to a Death Eater. I'm not sure you ever even had a choice." He paused; Malfoy was silent, to Harry's surprise.

"Tell me something, Malfoy... imagine you had a chance to start again, the Cleansing reversed... would you still do to Pansy what you told her you would after you cut her?"

An evil grin came to Malfoy's face; he gazed into the distance for a second, as if recalling a blissful memory. "Oh, Potter, I've had a lot of time to spend here imagining, carefully planning, what I'm going to do to her. And I will. I'll get out of here, and track her down, one day. It's going to take days, it's going to be fantastic. And you know," he added conspiratorially, "it was going to be a surprise, but since we're old pals, I could tell you the first part of it. Get her in the mood a bit. And one of the best parts is, I'm going to make sure I get Weasley, too. He gets to watch."

Harry shook his head sadly. "That's about what I expected, but I just thought I'd ask. No thanks, Malfoy, they've both got better things to do than listen to your sick fantasies. That reminds me, I've got to remember, I'm working on a Ring of Reduction for them. You know, for when they... well, you don't want to hear about that—"

“What an abomination. They deserve each other.”

“Oddly enough, that’s what I think, too. Glad we found something in common.”

“I will, Potter, I’ll get out of here and track them down—”

“No, you won’t, Malfoy, and here’s why,” said Harry with more satisfaction than he really wanted to feel. “I lifted the Memory Charm I placed on you in September, but of course I’ll have to replace it before I leave, and include this conversation in it. I don’t think you’ll escape before they execute you, but I know it’s not impossible, so the Memory Charm is just to be on the safe side. Now, the reason you’ll do nothing even if you escape is that when you get back, the first thing Voldemort will do is check to make sure his Memory Charm is still intact—which it won’t be—and look for new ones. He’ll find this one, and won’t be able to get through it even with your help, since I’m stronger than him. So, he’ll do what he would do if you refused to help him: use the Cruciatu s Curse until your mind breaks open. I think it still wouldn’t work, but you’d be way past any kind of help by the time he figured that out. So, it’s safe to say that you won’t be in any position to do anything to Pansy. But after I do the Memory Charm, you’ll forget any of this ever happened, and sink back into your awful, disgusting fantasy that keeps you going until they come to execute you—something which, I’m sad to say, I’m becoming more comfortable with every minute.

“Okay, I think I got what I needed. Is there anything you’d like to say—hopefully, that isn’t too depraved and violent—before I put the Memory Charm back?”

There was burning anger in Malfoy’s eyes. “The next time I see you, Potter, you’ll see me, but you won’t know it’s me until it’s too late.”

Harry gave a light shrug. “Well, it wasn’t depraved, at least. Seems unlikely, though.” He pointed his wand at Malfoy and said, “Please remain standing while I do this, it’ll just take a second.”

Malfoy gave him a defiant look and immediately lay back down on his bed, in the same position he'd been in when Harry arrived. Malfoy never was too bright, thought Harry as he applied the Memory Charm.

Thirty minutes later, sitting on two beds in the boys' bedroom, Harry and his friends exited the Pensieve. "That was a nice touch there, at the end," said Hermione. "I suppose you wanted him on the bed so he wouldn't wonder why he suddenly changed position."

"Yes, not that it mattered that much, of course," replied Harry. "He wouldn't be able to remember anyway. Just for neatness, I guess."

"I wonder what he meant by that last bit," said Ginny.

"I guessed it was something to do with Polyjuice Potion," suggested Harry, as Hermione nodded. "He's had nothing to do but hatch plots, even if he can't do anything about them."

Harry glanced at Ron and Pansy; he had been watching them when Malfoy's references to them had come up. Seeing his glance, Pansy rolled her eyes. "Harry, please. You can't think anything he said there would bother me. Even if he was free, he couldn't touch me, and as you pointed out, if he gets away he'll end up wishing he'd been executed. I feel very safe, don't worry."

"It wasn't so much that I didn't think you were safe, just that I thought this might have... negative associations," Harry clarified.

"No... I think seeing this may have done me some good, actually. He's just so powerless, and... pathetic, really. All he can do is fantasize about violence all day long. There's just nothing more to his life anymore, it would be sad if it wasn't Malfoy. But he's really earned this. I assume that's why you asked him the question about me.

"But you know, Harry, he did have a choice. He may have been steered in this direction, but we all have choices. Look at Professor Snape, he chose an

extremely hard life because he decided he had made a wrong choice. If he can do that, someone like Malfoy can choose, too.” Harry saw her point.

“Are you going to call Bright and tell him you’ve decided?” asked Hermione.

“I already did,” he said. “I told Kingsley at the site, and used one of their fireplaces to tell Bright. Neither had much reaction, but I got the impression that they were both glad that I made this choice.”

“They know this hasn’t been easy for you,” agreed Hermione. “To tell you the truth, I’m glad you made this choice, too.” Harry nodded, appreciating the sentiment, that she preferred that he made the choice with less risk to him.

“Seems kind of weird, to think that Malfoy’ll be dead soon,” remarked Neville.

“Kind of good, you mean,” put in Ron. “But yes, I know what you mean. But he won’t be the first member of our class who died... just the first one who deserved it.”

“Well, Crabbe and Goyle,” pointed out Ginny. “But yes, he really deserved it.” Turning to Harry, she asked, “How do you feel about the whole thing now?”

He thought for a few seconds. “Like it’s not all about me,” he finally said. “Rudolphus was right about that, I do take too much on myself. Talking to Malfoy helped me realize that there are other aspects to this. I mean, I knew that, of course, but this made it easier to see. I still think the principle is really important, but I can’t be Albus, at least not right now. I guess I’m getting a little more comfortable that I’m not like he was.”

“No, you’re like you,” said Ginny, sitting across from him. “And I love you.”

He smiled. “I love you, too.” To the others, he said, “So, why don’t we all go in to Diagon Alley tomorrow, have lunch, walk around?”

“I don’t know,” said Ron. “You know how I hate to be pestered.”

“We’ll take Polyjuice Potion,” joked Harry. “I’ll be you, you’ll be me.”

“And then what?” asked Pansy with a sly smile.

Hermione, Neville, and Ginny broke up laughing, and even Harry laughed a little. Unable to keep a smile off his face, Ron said, “Don’t be disgusting.” After a second, he added thoughtfully, “Wow, that’s disgusting in two ways. Really impressive.”

“It’s why I couldn’t resist,” explained Pansy. After another minute, Ron, Pansy, Neville, and Hermione left the room. With Ginny watching, Harry got to work on the extra Ring of Reduction.