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## CHAPTER 19

### SNAPE AND NEVILLE

At nine-thirty the next morning, Harry entered Snape's quarters. He found McGonagall in the bedroom, sitting in the chair next to the bed. "How's he doing?"

"No change from yesterday, I'm afraid," said McGonagall. "The only difference is that there is less pain, and more staring off into space. He must be learning not to stray outside the memories."

"That's bad, we have to do something," said Harry.

"I am open to suggestions," offered McGonagall.

Harry sighed, as he didn't have any at the moment. "I'm really not sure what to do. I've done this twice already, with even more intensity than I used with Voldemort. The effects of the Cleansing should be reversed."

"You have done what you have done only when certain memories are summoned," said McGonagall. "Perhaps you need to apply the energy to other areas as well."

He grimaced. "I really don't want to do that. I've thought of that, but the problem is, once I start doing that to anyone I'm not sure Voldemort already affected, there's a risk that I'll do to him what I plan to do to Voldemort. With Voldemort, I'm just going to blanket his entire mind with this, because I have to be sure that the evil has no place to operate from. He won't be the person Tom Riddle used to be, but I can't worry about that. But with Professor Snape, if I apply love so that in some areas he can't feel negative emotions, he wouldn't be a regular person. I don't want to take that risk."

"Understandable," conceded McGonagall. "But we should do something."

“I can check again with the Imperius Charm. It occurred to me, maybe there will be no pain if he leaves the memories, but he doesn’t know. I hate to do it to him, but we really should know.”

She nodded her assent, and Harry pointed the wand at Snape, then did the Imperius Charm. Again, Snape screamed in pain, and Harry instantly ceased the spell.

He looked at McGonagall in frustration, then had a sudden idea. He walked over to the far side of the bed, near the room’s window. “I’m sorry about that, Professor,” he said; Snape showed no reaction. “Professor, could you move over to this side?” Still no reaction. Harry reached for Snape’s feet, and pulled him to the side of the bed, put Snape’s feet on the floor, and moved him up into a sitting position. Snape offered no help, but no resistance, and stayed sitting after Harry let go of him.

As McGonagall looked on in confusion, Harry said, in a voice slightly louder than usual, “Okay, Professor, Minerva and I are going to go now, for a while. Just stay here, it’ll be good for you to be facing the window. See you later.” He walked to the bedroom door, which Snape’s back was to, putting a finger to his lips and taking McGonagall by the arm, guiding her out of the bedroom without closing the door.

They walked to the door to Snape’s quarters. Harry opened the door and shut it loudly, but he and McGonagall stayed inside. Again motioning for McGonagall to stay quiet, Harry crept back to the bedroom door, McGonagall at his side, glancing at him as if wondering whether he had taken leave of his senses. Harry felt he couldn’t blame her.

He took a silent step into the bedroom; Snape was still staring into space, in the direction of the window. Mentally crossing his fingers, Harry raised his wand and applied the Imperius Charm again. There was no reaction for a second, and just as Harry was starting to wonder whether he’d done it properly, Snape stood and turned to face them, his expression one of surprise.

Harry smiled broadly and silently exulted. "I knew it! Well, I suspected it, anyway. Professor Snape, how do you feel?"

"I expect that I should be screaming, but I'm not," he said in a tone of wonder. "I feel... very happy, I believe 'blissful' would be the word, though I have never felt it before, so I cannot be sure. It feels... wonderful."

McGonagall turned to Harry. "Does he feel that way because the reversal has been effective, or because he is under the influence of the Imperius Charm?"

"The second," said Harry. "Professor Snape, the reason you're not screaming is that the reversal was effective; you just didn't know it. It was probably effective the first time I did it. You didn't scream because there was pain; you screamed because you thought there would be pain, and because of that, there was. This time, I just took you by surprise. The reversal was effective; there will be no more pain. Do you understand?"

Snape was smiling, truly happy; Harry had only ever seen that expression on the half of Snape that he had been missing. "I am in command of my faculties right now, more than well enough to understand your question. What you mean is, do I accept what you are saying, and the answer is yes."

Harry couldn't help smiling at seeing Snape smile, even though it was under the Charm. "I also meant, will you accept it even after I withdraw the Charm?"

Snape looked around the room, as if seeing it for the first time. "I wish you didn't have to withdraw it, but I understand. To answer your question, I believe I will accept it, but I am not sure how I will feel once you withdraw the Charm."

"I understand," said Harry. "I want you to keep in mind that you don't have to hide in the memories anymore, that you can stay in your usual consciousness, that there won't be the pain that you thought there would be. It's important that you stay in your usual consciousness, to get used to it. Do you think you can do that?"

"I'll try," said Snape, still happy.

Harry hated to take that away, but knew he had to. "Okay, I'm going to remove the Charm now. Minerva and I will be right here, if you need anything." He

lifted the Charm. Snape let out a sharp cry, and fell onto the bed, looking overwhelmed. “Stay with us, Professor,” said Harry urgently. “Don’t go back into the memories.”

Snape made exclamations of severe discomfort as he wrapped himself into the fetal position on the bed. He gasped and writhed.

Deciding he had to find out what Snape was feeling, Harry cast Legilimens, and looked for Snape’s memories of the past minute. After viewing them, he spoke to McGonagall. “It isn’t exactly pain, it’s hard to put into words. It’s like a shock; not an electrical one, but the kind you’d get by jumping into really cold water. But your body gets used to water in a minute; I don’t know how long this is going to take. He hasn’t had the possibility of feeling these emotions for such a long time, it’s like he needs to get used to having that ability again.”

McGonagall watched Snape writhe and shiver on the bed; Harry saw the concern on her face. “Is there nothing we can do for him?”

“Yes, there is. Take his hand. Better yet, let him hold you.” McGonagall raised an eyebrow at Harry; there was no reaction from Snape. “I just felt what he’s feeling, Professor,” he said impatiently. “He needs something to hold on to, to focus on. It’s an effort for him not to go back to the memories. I’d do it, but I think he’d rather it was you.”

She nodded, and sat on the bed. She tentatively reached for him, taking his hand, then giving him a gentle tug. Realizing that she wasn’t doing what was necessary and that Snape wasn’t going to help, Harry sat on the bed and hauled Snape up by the shoulders into a sitting position. He moved Snape’s right arm, draping it around McGonagall’s shoulder. She took her cue, moving closer and putting her arms around Snape. “Hold on to her, Professor,” said Harry firmly. “Healer’s orders.”

McGonagall gave him a fleeting look of annoyance, but Snape did hold onto McGonagall more tightly, still saying nothing. Harry cast Legilimens again. “It’s helped,” he reported. “He’s doing what I hoped, he’s focusing his attention on

holding you. The discomfort isn't any less, he just has something else to focus on now.”

McGonagall nodded, and held Snape a little more tightly after he shivered again. They sat in silence; after a minute, she said, “Harry, perhaps you should get Mathilda from St. Mungo’s. She could give him something, make him feel it less strongly—”

She cut herself off as Snape shook his head vigorously, startling McGonagall. Harry cast Legilimens again, as it seemed to be the only way to communicate with Snape. After he finished, he said, “He is aware of us, what we’re saying, but he’s focusing his attention on dealing with this, which he should. He doesn’t want Healer Haspberg to do anything partly because of his natural preference not to get outside help for this sort of thing, and partly because he feels that... I think the phrase is, ‘the only way out is through,’ and making him feel less will just make this take longer, that it should just go how it’s going to go. Also, in a way, he welcomes the discomfort, even though it’s pretty intense, because of what it represents.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “That was a lot of information to get, in a few seconds.”

He shrugged. “With Hermione and the phoenixes, I’m getting used to translating feelings into words.”

“I would imagine,” she agreed. After another silence, she asked, “What made you think of doing that? It seemed like a very odd thing to try.”

“Really, I don’t know. Maybe it was all the times Albus has talked about how important thoughts are. It just occurred to me that since this is all about what happens in his mind, that sort of idea might be even more important than usual. I thought, what if it did work, and he just doesn’t know it? That made me think of doing what I did. I’m just glad it worked.”

“I suppose we cannot even begin to guess how long this stage of his recovery will take,” she said.

“No, we can’t. But at least the hardest part is over; now, it seems more like a matter of when, than if.” Easy for me to say, he thought, I’m not the one in intense, long-term discomfort. But he’ll get through it. He managed for seventeen years, resisting the impulses of being Cleansed. He can do this.

Shortly after Harry returned to the Burrow, the others decided to take Harry up on his suggestion from the day before, and go to Diagon Alley. They spent three hours, and had lunch; Harry had the hamburger he’d been thinking about since Saturday. They were waved at by a few groups of Hogwarts students, and Harry was briefly approached by a few well-wishers, but for the most part they were left alone.

Back at the Burrow, Harry spent more time relaxing, and tried not to think about the executions. Then he spent the rest of the afternoon finishing up the copy of his Ring of Reduction, and gave it to Pansy. Very appreciative, she thanked him and told him that she and Ron would be trying it out as soon as possible.

The next morning, after breakfast and some relaxing (“I have a very heavy schedule of relaxing,” he explained to Hermione when she asked him about his vacation plans), he went to see Snape again. Approaching the door to Snape’s quarters, he opened the door with his wand. Sitting in a chair, Snape put down the copy of the Prophet he was reading. “Some people knock,” he observed dryly.

“Professor!” exclaimed Harry, walking over to the sofa and sitting. “How are you doing?”

“Adequately, I suppose one could say,” replied Snape. “Not well, I would admit. I continued to be in a rather high level of discomfort throughout most of yesterday, though it did ease off slightly in the evening. The headmistress insisted that I take something to help me sleep. When I resisted, she threatened to ‘get Healer Haspberg or Healer Potter in here, whichever disturbs you the most.’ I reluctantly acquiesced, because I knew she would do it.”

“Yes, she would,” agreed Harry, grinning. “But she was right, you did need to get some sleep.”

“I felt that my body’s need for sleep would eventually overpower the discomfort, and that it was best that that happen naturally. She pointed out that nothing about the situation was natural. It did not change my feeling about the situation, but I did as she asked anyway. This morning, I felt that the discomfort had eased even more. It is still present, of course, but at the current rate of... healing, I suppose, it may be gone in as soon as two days.”

“I hope so, that would be great,” Harry enthused.

Snape looked up at the still-grinning Harry, puzzled. “What are you smiling at?”

“You. It’s so great to see you like this.”

Snape looked even more puzzled. “Like what? I am not laughing, or dancing in the halls. I am not aware that my demeanor is any different than it was.”

“Oh, it is,” said Harry. “It’s in your eyes, the look in your eyes is very different. It used to be that the look in your eyes was... anger, I guess is the best word. Even if you were doing your best to be polite, your eyes showed anger. I always sort of assumed that was your default emotion. Now, that anger isn’t there. Sometimes I can see that you’re in discomfort, but your eyes are more neutral, just like anybody else’s. You could get angry, of course, you’re just not that way all the time.”

Snape nodded. “I had not thought of it exactly like that, as I have been in too much discomfort to notice. You are correct, of course, and you were correct about my anger. I had plenty to be angry about, but it was either that, or feel nothing. Even with the discomfort I currently feel, it is as though an oppressive weight has been lifted off my shoulders.”

He paused, then looked at Harry, his expression serious. “I would like to thank you for what you have done.” Harry smiled again, and felt emotion rise up. After a few seconds, taking on a more casual expression, Snape added, “However, I really cannot bring myself to do so. Perhaps some time in the future.”

Puzzled just for a second, Harry was silent, then he started laughing, harder and harder. As his laughter died down, Harry could have sworn he saw the right side of Snape's mouth curl upwards just a fraction, but he wasn't sure. "It was not quite that funny," said Snape, sounding amused.

"Considering the situation, it was very funny," said Harry, still smiling. "Not only that, but it was a deliberate joke, I'd guess your first one in a long time that didn't involve anger or some other negative emotion."

"It may have been my first one ever that did not," corrected Snape. "Even before I was Cleansed, I was angry for a very long time. I imagine that the headmaster warned you that obvious changes in my temperament might not be apparent."

"Your other half, I guess I should say, the half you were missing, warned me. I guess the idea is that if you were angry a lot even before this was done, you might not be so different once you were restored."

"I did not know how I would feel, of course. For a very long time, I did not imagine that this was possible. By the time I realized that it might be possible, I was in such an emotional state at my activities having been exposed that I was unable to think rationally. In a way, it is as if this suddenly happened, without any opportunity for preparation." Snape spoke calmly and thoughtfully.

"I can only imagine how hard it's been to adapt to," said Harry.

Snape nodded. "Indeed. But as you sensed yesterday, it is a challenge that I relish."

"Let me ask you something," said Harry. "Suppose you had had a choice, before this happened: you could have had Voldemort dead, and you in your old state for the rest of your life; or the current situation, you as you are now and the Voldemort situation undecided. Which would you have picked?"

Snape gave Harry a penetrating look, one that Harry knew well, except for the current lack of anger in this one. He considered the question, then finally answered. Without anger or sympathy, he said, "You really are quite transparent.



You would like... not forgiveness, but to feel less responsible for your mistake on the plane with the Dark Lord. And do not look at me like that; if I say his name, it will be in my own time.”

Harry cut in before Snape could continue. “I didn’t expect you would just start saying his name. If I reacted, it was because of the other thing you said. I didn’t say it because I was trying to feel better about what happened. I really am curious about which is, or would have been, more important to you.”

“You did not say it for that reason consciously, but that was a part of it,” countered Snape. “A perceptive observer can understand your motivations better than you can, I believe. In any case, I cannot absolve you of guilt for your mistake, you must do that yourself.” In response to Harry’s mildly surprised expression, Snape said, “I did learn a few things from my vast experience viewing the headmaster’s memories, and that was one of them. That is one of the very positive aspects of what has happened: at that time, I knew that I was learning things that could be tremendously useful, if only I could use them. It was as though a person without hands was learning to be a carpenter, from a great master carpenter. I imagine that at some point, I may be able to call upon what I learned from him.

“To answer your question... for a very long time, I had no hope of my condition ever being reversed, so my sole *raison d’être* became the Dark Lord’s defeat. My obsession was such that had I been given the choice you postulate, I would have chosen the Dark Lord’s defeat without giving serious consideration to the alternative. You see, the headmaster told you that I came to him seventeen years ago hoping that the Cleansing could be reversed, but it was not long before I accepted the conclusion that it could not. It was something I could not dare hope for, so I would have had difficulty accepting the premise of such a choice. But had I the same choice to make now, I suspect I would make the selfish choice and opt for the present situation. Feeling what I feel now, it would be very difficult to contemplate returning to what I was, and there is a reasonable likelihood of your defeating the Dark Lord in the natural course of events, as things stand now.”

“I will,” said Harry. “You can bet on it.”

“I doubt any Aurors would bet against you,” commented Snape. “And if the look in your eyes is any indication, neither would I.”

Harry tried to decide whether that was an observation or a compliment. Maybe it’s both, he thought. He said, “Professor, I’d like to ask you a few questions about your condition right now. For example... could you smile if you wanted to?”

“I could smile before, but I take your meaning. I cannot see why not, but I do not plan to make a special effort to do so; if it happens, it must happen spontaneously. Also, old patterns may persist; despite my ability to have any emotion, some may not occur naturally, especially at first. So do not be overly distressed if you do not see me laughing anytime soon, your sparkling wit notwithstanding.”

Harry chuckled at Snape’s sarcasm, much easier to appreciate with the edge of anger gone. “Don’t worry, I would have assumed you’d be far more likely to laugh at my expense than at something I said. After all, that’s the way it is with the other five. My next question is, how do you feel about my father?”

Snape’s eyebrows rose. “Are you sure you... I see, you are checking to see that my capacity to feel negative emotions is undamaged. I still detest him, both him and Black. I know you feel that he changed in his later years; I never saw any indication that he had, but then, I almost never encountered him after Hogwarts, not that such a determination would have changed the way I felt. More than that, I suspect I should not say.”

Harry could believe that, and was just as happy to have Snape stop when he did. He hadn’t wanted to ask the question, but felt he should. “By the way, this isn’t to check on your condition, but I’m just wondering... why did you go after Neville the way you did?”

Snape’s reaction was also familiar to Harry: surprise that Harry would be so dense. “I would have thought you understood this from our previous conversations. It was because he was weak; he made himself a target. In my previous condition, it

was second nature to seek out targets for emotional harassment, and his reactions made him a prime candidate. And no, before you ask, I will not be doing that any longer, to him or anyone. It was almost not a conscious choice, but something done by instinct. I would have done it much more, left to my natural inclinations.”

“I guess that was the whole point, that you had to fight against. So, you don’t think there are any problems, anything strange that was a result of what I did?”

“I am not truly in a position to tell, this soon afterwards. There is still the discomfort, of course, but it is somewhat offset by the... ‘euphoria’ may be too strong a word, of having been restored to normal. But there is nothing in the nature of what you are asking. If there is, I will inform you if it is something I think you can do anything about.”

Harry figured that was as much as he was going to get out of Snape. “Okay,” he said, deciding that he couldn’t think of anything more to ask Snape, and that he shouldn’t hang around unless Snape asked him to. “Would you mind if I dropped in sometimes during vacation, to see how you’re doing?”

Snape shrugged lightly. “It should not be necessary, but since you seem to be taking this ‘Healer’ business seriously, I will indulge you.”

“That’s very good of you, I appreciate it,” Harry replied humorously. Very happy that Snape was doing so much better, he stood and headed for the door.

As Harry opened it to leave, Snape spoke again. “Oh, and Harry, please tell the headmistress that she need not check on me; I will inform her if I need her assistance.”

Harry beamed in pleasure. “I will, Professor. And I promise to knock next time.”

Ten minutes later, Harry finished relating some of the story to Hermione, Neville, and Pansy; Ron and Ginny were out flying. “He called you ‘Harry?’” asked Hermione, mouth open in surprise.

“I couldn’t believe it, either,” he said. “He was very casual about it, but obviously he knew what he was doing. When I gave her the message, McGonagall looked a lot like you just did. She said it was a high compliment, and that I shouldn’t expect him to do it again.”

“I guess that, and the joke about thanking you, were his way or letting you know how much he appreciated what you did,” she said, still amazed. “You deserve it, of course, you basically gave him his life back. I guess the rest of us can’t be quite as happy as you are, but I am happy for him.”

“I’m happy for the students he won’t torment in the future,” said Neville, pointedly declining to say that he was happy for Snape. Neville had been unimpressed when Harry relayed Snape’s answer to the question involving him.

“Neville, he had this unbelievable burden—” started Harry.

“No one pinned him down and made him get Cleansed,” retorted Neville. “He chose that.”

“Of course, you’re right,” admitted Harry. “But what he did after that was pretty amazing, more than most people could have done. Obviously it doesn’t excuse what he did, but it does explain it.”

Neville seemed annoyed, as if being asked to do something he didn’t want to do. “Harry, Hermione’s told me that you’ve seen Snape’s memories, suffering being tortured, suffering from his condition. So, it’s natural that you’d feel sympathy for him. But I haven’t seen that, all I’ve seen of him is him trying to crush my spirit. You can’t expect me to suddenly be like, it’s so wonderful that he’s all right again.”

“Neville, I wasn’t asking anything of you—”

“It seemed like you were.”

“I wasn’t. Well, okay, just that you consider what he’d been through when you thought about what he’d done to you. But only because doing that helped me deal with what he’d done to me. Which was quite a bit, as you well know.”

Neville grunted in agreement. “From the very first class. ‘Clearly, fame isn’t everything,’” he intoned, imitating Snape’s snide tone more than his voice. “He

didn't even say anything to me, and I still wished I could drop the class. He could probably sense it, even without me saying anything."

Harry decided to say nothing more to Neville in Snape's defense. No one said anything for a minute, then Neville said, with the air of one making a concession, "Well, I'm glad you're happy, anyway. I'm going upstairs for a bit."

After Neville was gone, Harry gave Hermione an inquiring look. "Well, you know what Snape's put him through," she said.

"Of course I do, but he isn't usually like that," Harry pointed out.

"We had a... not a fight, but kind of a misunderstanding," she explained. "He isn't in as good a mood as usual."

"Well, we all get like that sometimes," agreed Harry. "I guess I shouldn't expect everyone else to be happy just because I am."

Pansy started to speak, but just as she did, Harry felt his hand tingle, and heard Ginny's voice in his head. "I don't believe you!" she said. "What did you do that for?"

"Oh, good, it came," he said into his hand. "I'll be right there." He excused himself from Hermione and Pansy as Fawkes appeared. He grabbed Fawkes's tail, and the next thing he knew, he was hovering in midair, opposite Ron and Ginny, Ron on his Firebolt, Ginny on Harry's.

Ginny was holding onto a wrapped package, the shape obviously one of a broom. She tore off the wrapping to reveal a Firebolt. "I had a feeling this was what it was. I love it, but why did you do that? You know how I feel about brooms."

"I didn't buy it for you for the same reason I did for him," explained Harry, gesturing to Ron. "With you, it's for a few reasons. One, because we'll be flying together sometimes, hopefully for a long time, and it's better if we have the same kind of broom. Another reason is just that it's nice." Ginny handed the wrapping to Ron, who Vanished it. She exchanged Harry's broom for the new one, and handed Harry his as he talked; Harry mounted it, and hovered on it as Fawkes disappeared.

“The other big reason,” continued Harry, “is that I still think there might be an attack on the castle. It’s less likely now, because we got part of that artifact, but it could still happen. I decided to buy this before we got the artifact, but I still think it’s a good idea. I’ve been thinking about, if that happens, what do we do about me.”

“You mean, who’s with you,” said Ron. “I was thinking about that myself. It’s hard to decide, because you’re both the one that needs to be protected at any cost, and our most powerful offensive weapon. It’s like if this were a chess game, you’d be both the king and queen.”

“I think Pansy would find a joke in there somewhere,” said an amused Harry, as Ron nodded. “But yes, that’s right. I accept that I need to be protected, but I also have to have maximum maneuverability. I can’t have a group of ten people surrounding me, I’d be too easy to catch. Obviously, once they identify me, they’ll gang up on me if they can. So what I want is just the two of you with me. You can watch out for me, let me concentrate on whatever I want to do.”

“Because we’re good enough fliers to stay with you,” said Ginny, “and with the Firebolt, I’ll be able to keep up with you at top speed.”

“Not to mention that if I tried to tell you to go somewhere else, you’d tell me where to go.”

“And not very politely, either,” she confirmed. “Glad you understand that.”

“I have managed to learn a few things, being with you for most of a year. So, that was part of the reason for this. It just seemed like a good idea overall. And it’s not your Christmas present. I didn’t want it to be this, because I wanted to get it for you anyway, and I know you didn’t want one that badly.”

“I will enjoy having it, though, that’s for sure,” said Ginny happily, as she flew in a few circles around Harry and Ron. “Do you want to join us for a while, or go someplace where I can thank you properly?”

Harry chuckled. “First the first thing, then the second.”

“Can you imagine if we three were the Chasers?” asked Ron, impressed at the idea. “We could score at will.”

Ginny smiled. “Harry can already—”

“Yes, I know, I saw that coming as soon as I said it,” interrupted Ron, rolling his eyes. “It’s obvious where your mind is. Really, you two can go, I’ll be fine.”

“We will, I just want to fly a little first, now that I’m out here,” said Harry. “C’mon, I’ll fly around and try to lose you, you try to stay with me.”

“You’ll never lose me,” Ginny assured him as he flew off, with her and Ron right behind him.

The next day, he and Neville had their usual daylong training with the Aurors; Harry asked to focus on tactics he could use against giants and airborne Death Eaters. They worked on area-effect spells, though Kingsley warned Harry that they wouldn’t work on giants. The Aurors taught them how to extend the Lumos spell to work like a flashlight, and to Kingsley’s surprise, Harry was quickly able to shine a tight beam of light onto a target at a distance of thirty yards, with more brightness than any of them could do. Kingsley felt that it wouldn’t do any actual damage, but would distract and anger a giant, which could be useful. He encouraged Harry to practice the spell, to see if he could increase its strength even more.

The day after that, the Burrow emptied somewhat: it was the day before Christmas, and Hermione and Neville went to Hermione’s parents’ house to spend the afternoon and evening. Ron and Pansy did the same for Pansy’s parents, somewhat more reluctantly. Harry and Ginny hung around for most of the day, Harry leaving only for a short time to talk to Snape in the morning. “He’s doing much better,” he reported to Ginny on his return. “The discomfort’s almost totally gone. Apparently he’s been spending most of his time reading, or just sitting there, enjoying the fact that the old state is gone.”

Everyone was back for Christmas Day, including Fred, George, Bill, and Charlie. It took over an hour to open all the presents, and as was the case the previous year, Harry had a wonderful time. He spent most of the day talking to Ron and Ginny's brothers about their jobs, and answering their questions about his life ("what we don't read in the Prophet, that is," clarified Bill). Hermione and Neville went to St. Mungo's in the afternoon to visit Neville's parents. Harry, Ron, Pansy, and Ginny offered to come along; Neville thanked them, but preferred that it was just he and Hermione.

While they were gone, Ron asked the others to join him on brooms, including Fred and George. Charlie and Bill came along, curious what they were up to. In the backyard, Ron faced Harry and Ginny. "I was thinking about what we were talking about, with the three of us having Firebolts now. What if we actually did what I mentioned, have the three of us be Chasers? I really think we could crush everyone, and for the first match especially, it would be a hell of a surprise. Ravenclaw wouldn't know what hit them."

"Would we be any good, though?" asked Harry. "After all, Ginny's the only one here with Chaser experience."

"We have flying experience, Harry," said Ron. "It's not that different. Not that being a Chaser is easy," he added hastily, noticing Ginny's indignant look, "but look at what we did the other day. You were doing all kinds of maneuvers to shake us, but we kept with you pretty well. The hardest part of being a Chaser is the coordination while flying, and we can already do that well. Harry and I would just have to practice passing at high speed, and shooting. If we could do that even halfway decently, we could just take the match by the throat. I really think we should think about this."

Harry and Ginny exchanged a grin, amused by Ron's enthusiasm. "I'm game," said Harry, as Ginny nodded.

"Great," enthused Ron. "Fred, George, Charlie, I want you to be opposing Chasers, and Bill, the Keeper."



“But our brooms are nowhere near as good as yours,” protested Fred.

“Our opponents’ won’t be either,” said Ron. “It’ll be realistic.”

“I’m up for the challenge,” offered George. “Of course, we may have to use sneaky tactics.”

“I’ll get our old Beaters’ clubs,” volunteered Fred, turning toward the house.

“You’re going to be Chasers here, not Beaters,” pointed out Ron.

“Yes, that’s what makes it sneaky,” explained George innocently.

“No clubs,” said Ron firmly. “I brought a Quaffle, that’s all we’ll need.”

“Well, that’s no fun,” sulked Fred. “But we still need hoops.”

Harry kicked off the ground and flew thirty feet into the air. He then conjured three hoops, setting each one in place with a Hover Charm. Flying closer to the ground, he shouted, “Do the positions look all right?”

“They look fine,” Bill shouted back. “How did you do that?”

Harry didn’t see why conjuring a few hoops should be so difficult. “We’ve learned not to ask him that question, he can never explain it,” said Ron. “Ready?”

They all flew up into the air, except for Pansy, who stayed on the ground and watched. Since Ginny was the only one with real experience as a Chaser, they were roughly equally matched in terms of skill. Harry would have preferred that they had some practice passing the Quaffle unimpeded, but he knew that the other Weasleys weren’t usually available, so it was better to use this opportunity. While not a Chaser, Harry knew the standard attack formations, and was able to execute them well.

At the end of an hour, Fred and George pronounced themselves impressed. “You may not have experience, but I’ve seen worse Chasers than you and Harry,” said George to an obviously pleased Ron. “With those brooms and a little more practice, you’ll be unbeatable. The only way anybody would have a chance would be if they got the Snitch in the first five minutes. So, if you do this, who’s going to be the Seeker and the Keeper?”

“If we got out to a big lead, like three hundred points, I’d send us back to our original positions,” said Ron. “Until then... Katie, Andrew, and Jack all graduated last year, so we have one Chaser and two Beater openings. When we do tryouts for those, I’ll have people try out for every position, even Keeper and Seeker, saying that we’re thinking about next year, who could move into the positions when Harry and I graduate. I’ll also have Dennis try both positions. When the match starts, I’ll have Dennis and the new Chaser change positions with Harry and I. We won’t practice this at Hogwarts, won’t even tell our team until just before the match.”

Bill smiled. “Got it all worked out, I see.”

“Tell you what,” added Charlie. “We’ll all be back here on New Year’s Day, and so will these two, with Diagon Alley closed for the holiday. You three practice this week, we’ll do this again then, see how much better you’ve gotten.”

“Now, that sounds like a good vacation project to me,” said Ron enthusiastically. Harry and Ginny nodded in agreement. It wasn’t quite so important to Harry that they be certain to win at Quidditch, but he liked the idea of spending time with Ron and Ginny, doing something he enjoyed so much.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next night, to Harry’s surprise, they were joined for dinner by Kingsley, Cassandra, and McGonagall. He wondered whose idea it had been to invite them, but didn’t want to ask anyone. About halfway through the meal, the subject of the Death Eater executions came up. At least I’ve made my decision, he thought, I don’t have to agonize over it any more.

“They’ve picked a date,” Kingsley was saying. “December thirtieth.”

Harry was startled, as was Hermione. “That’s only four days!” she exclaimed. “How are they going to have trials for all of them by then?”

“That’s easy,” said Kingsley. “There aren’t going to be any trials.”

Hermione's mouth hung open, and Arthur now looked startled. "No trials? I must say, Kingsley, I don't like this. Bad enough that we're killing them, but to not even have trials... whose decision was that?"

"Bright's, actually," said Kingsley. "I know what you mean, Arthur, but it's actually a principled decision, in its own way. I was in the meeting where it was discussed. One of the undersecretaries was saying something about how many trials we'd have to schedule each day. Bright just said, 'No trials.' The other political people just looked at him; the one who was speaking started to say that it would make it look better, as if justice had been done.

"Bright interrupted him, kind of irritated. He said, 'Yes, I was born longer ago than yesterday, I understand that. But as long as I'm Minister, we aren't going to have any trials where there's only one possible verdict.' He asked me if I was confident that everyone we had in custody was either a Death Eater, or guilty of attempted murder in the service of Death Eaters; I said I was. He told the undersecretary that a Legilimens would check each of the prisoners sometime before their execution, that he would be satisfied with that."

"Now, that's not going to be a fun job. Who's he going to get to do it?" asked Arthur; Harry winced internally as he wondered whether Bright intended to do it himself.

"I didn't ask right then, of course," said Kingsley. "But I stayed back after everyone had left, and asked him. He was vague, he just said there was someone he had in mind. I was kind of concerned. I said, 'It isn't anyone I know, is it?' He knew who I meant, of course, since there's only one person that he and I both know is a Legilimens. He said, 'Of course not. If he came in here volunteering to do it, I'd tell him to get lost.' I got the feeling he was disappointed in me for thinking that he might ask."

"I'm sure he knew that you were just looking out for Harry," said Molly.

“He does like me, Kingsley, just so you know,” Harry assured him. “I’ve checked him enough to know that. He wouldn’t ask that of me, but I appreciate your making sure.”

“Ministers of Magic aren’t exactly known for looking out for anyone’s best interests but their own,” pointed out Kingsley. “I didn’t really think he would do that; my impression was also that he liked you, but I was just being careful.”

“Well, I do see what you mean about the trials,” conceded Arthur. “What he means, rather. I had wondered how that would work; to have real trials would take a long time for so many people, and the whole point of doing this is to get rid of them soon. It is principled, in an odd sort of way. It’s as if he’s saying, ‘let’s face up to the fact that we’re doing something we shouldn’t be proud of.’ I can respect that, even if I don’t agree with the whole thing.”

“There’s also the security aspect of it, the executions being so soon,” added Kingsley. “Four days is hardly any time for the Death Eaters to gear up for a rescue attempt, and we’ve got three times the usual number of people watching the prisoners. They aren’t going anywhere, but the longer we try to keep up that kind of security, the harder it is.”

“Who’s going to perform the actual executions?” asked Arthur. Harry realized he hadn’t thought about that aspect of it.

“They’ll be done by various anonymous people,” replied Kingsley. Startled by a sudden thought, Harry unconsciously reached out with Legilimens, then looked at his plate as casually as he could, taking another bite of his food. He wished he hadn’t found out what he had, that Kingsley had volunteered for the duty. The flash of memory Harry had seen had also told him that Kingsley hadn’t especially wanted to, but had felt it was a kind of duty, as he had approved of the executions, and there weren’t that many wizards who could do the Killing Curse.

“Bet there was no shortage of volunteers,” commented Ron.

“I believe you would be right about that,” said Kingsley. “I don’t even know the names, of course, that information is being very closely held. But it wouldn’t surprise me at all if some of them were relatives of people the Death Eaters killed.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me, either,” muttered Molly. Arthur gave her a questioning glance; she sighed. “No, I probably wouldn’t even if I knew the Killing Curse, but I should. It seems... cowardly to approve of the killings but not be willing to do it myself.” Harry understood that this was Kingsley’s reason for volunteering.

“I wish you wouldn’t put it quite that way,” said Ron uncomfortably.

“She didn’t mean you, obviously,” said Arthur.

“Of course not, dear,” added Molly, now looking as though she regretted having said it.

“But I am seventeen,” Ron pointed out. “If it applies to everyone, it should to me as well. Of course, I don’t think I could actually do it, because of the energy of love. If Harry had never discovered that, though, I might have been able to do it, if I could have gotten Malfoy in particular. But now, even that idea seems... unappealing.”

“I think the energy of love gets you into a certain way of thinking, and then you get used to it,” suggested Hermione. “Obviously, approving of something being done and doing it yourself are two very different things.” Harry caught Ron giving Pansy a meaningful look, and understood that while Ron found the idea of killing personally to be highly unappealing, he would kill Malfoy himself if that were the only way it could happen.

“It is a very interesting question that Molly raises,” said Cassandra. “Should we have to be willing to do this ourselves so that we, in good conscience, can approve it being done on our behalf?”

“It is interesting,” agreed Arthur. “On the one hand, we rely on government to do all sorts of things for us so we don’t have to, and one of those is to keep order. One could argue that doing morally objectionable things is sometimes

necessary to keeping order. On the other hand, if you wouldn't do it yourself because it's wrong, or harmful, how can you condone someone else doing it so you don't have to?"

"I'm curious, Harry, how would Dumbledore have felt about this?" wondered Cassandra.

"That's a pretty easy question, at least, if you've been talking to him almost every night for the past... wow, it's been six months since he died, I hadn't really thought about it like that... anyway, he would have definitely not asked the government to do anything that he felt was wrong, no matter how much it benefited him, or anyone else. He would have felt that that was the right way to be... for him. He wouldn't have said that *we* shouldn't do that, just that *he* shouldn't. He wouldn't have made any judgments about what other people should think, what they should feel was right."

Sitting across from him, McGonagall gave him a little smile. "I cannot tell you, Harry, how many times I heard him say that. 'People must make their own judgments, Minerva.' This usually happened, of course, when I was complaining about some judgment someone had made which I felt was wrong." Now smiling a little at her own expense, she added, slightly conspiratorially, "I remember one occasion when he said that, and I wasn't in the mood for it. I was irritated, and I said, 'What if one of my judgments is that other people should not make the judgments they make?' Just as calm as ever, with that smile that was often in his eyes, he said, 'You must, of course, make that judgment yourself.' And then we both laughed."

Harry was laughing himself. "I can just see it. The strange thing is, I don't think it would be that funny if it was anybody but him, I don't know why."

"Yes, I think you're right," agreed McGonagall. "It was typical of his sense of humor, which was gentle, just like him. He was making fun of both of us, in a way." Glancing down the table, Harry noticed that while some others were smiling,

only he and McGonagall had laughed. He wondered if perhaps it was only funny if one had spent a certain amount of time around Dumbledore.

After dinner, they all sat around and talked for a while; one group in the kitchen, and one in the living room, as it was a little difficult for eleven people to sit comfortably in the living room. Arthur showed Kingsley and Cassandra the computer, and the wizarding websites; they discussed how ironic it was that while they posed a threat to wizarding secrecy, they had also been a factor in saving dozens, perhaps hundreds, of lives. Had Dudley not been chatting with residents of Hogsmeade at the time, no one would have gotten there until it was too late. Recalling that Dudley's involvement had been mentioned in Hugo's article the next day, Harry wondered whether Petunia had been sent that article, and if so, what her reaction had been.

About an hour after dinner had ended, the people in the kitchen came into the living room, including Neville and Hermione. They walked up to Harry, who was sitting at one end of the sofa, next to Ginny. "Harry, there's something Neville and I would like you to do for us." She looked a little nervous, and was speaking more loudly than usual, as if everyone needed to hear.

"Sure," he replied, baffled at her manner. "What is it?"

Neville answered. "The Joining of Hands."

It took a few seconds for the request to register, then Harry broke into a wide smile. "I'd love to."

Around the room, people were smiling. "Oh, my goodness," squeaked Molly happily. "I'm going to cry, I know I am."

"It's all right, Molly, we don't mind," said a smiling Neville. Turning to Harry, he added, "You did learn it, right?"

As Ron, Ginny, and Pansy laughed, Harry fought the urge to pretend he'd forgotten; he didn't want to make jokes about something like that. "I did, in fact, in the last two weeks of the summer." He had wanted to be ready in case they had

decided to have it done on Hermione's seventeenth birthday. "You want to do it right now?"

"Whenever you're ready," Hermione encouraged him. Harry wondered why her parents weren't there, but then remembered a conversation they'd had over the summer, in which Hermione had told him that she didn't plan to have her parents witness her Joining of Hands with Neville, as they would think she was too young, despite being an adult in the wizarding world. She planned to include them in her wedding, which she felt would be more meaningful to them anyway.

He stood at one end of the living room, the computer desk behind him; the sofa was moved toward the wall, so there would be more room for people to stand. As everyone stood behind Neville and Hermione, Harry suddenly realized why those particular dinner guests had been chosen. Cassandra and Kingsley were clearly there at Neville's invitation, and McGonagall, at Hermione's. As if on cue, Crookshanks came bounding down the stairs, and Fawkes and Flora suddenly appeared, perching on the end of the sofa nearest Hermione and Neville.

"Well, now that everyone's here..." said an amused Harry. "I assume you've decided..." He trailed off as, facing each other, they held each other's left hand.

Harry wondered what he should say, then decided he should just say whatever came to his mind, since he hadn't had a chance to prepare. "When Ginny and I did this, in the spring, Albus said it was an honor to do it, since it was the last one he would do, and that it was for Ginny and I. Well, you can imagine how I feel now. This is the first time I've done it, and I get to do it for you two. I'm very, very happy to be able to do this. I'm sure it'll be as much of a joy, and a comfort, for you two as it has been for Ginny and I."

He paused, about to continue, then received an impression from Fawkes; he gasped slightly, trying to keep his composure. "I was just about to say something about the group of people here being small, but Fawkes has just reminded me that this is a larger gathering than... than is apparent to us. Albus is here, of course. And through Albus, then Fawkes, then me, Frank and Alice want it to be known that



they're here as well. They said..." Harry paused to catch his breath, as he felt a tear roll down his cheek, and he could see that he was far from the only one so affected. Struggling to keep his voice steady, he continued, "They're asking me to thank Neville and Hermione for telling them first, yesterday afternoon. And to say that they couldn't be happier."

Both now crying freely, Neville and Hermione stepped forward and hugged each other, heads on each other's shoulders. Molly, Cassandra, and Harry's friends were all crying as well, even Ron; Kingsley, Arthur, and McGonagall weren't, but seemed to be making serious efforts to avoid doing so. A few more tears escaped Harry, who then smiled as he got another message. "Alice says that if she were here physically, she would be crying, so she appreciates that we're doing it for her."

This was met with laughter, and people stopped crying. As Hermione let go of Neville, Pansy stepped up to her and joked, "I bet you don't have enough tissues for everyone." Hermione laughed, and Molly passed around a box of tissues.

After a few seconds, Harry said, "Okay, I think we're all okay to continue..." Neville, Hermione, do you want to..." Neville and Hermione held each other's left hands again, holding them at about shoulder level. Harry took a few seconds to look at both of them, enjoying the love he saw in their eyes. Remembering the instructions in Dumbledore's book, Harry concentrated as he waved his wand over their heads twice, around their hands once, and then very carefully touched the tip of his wand to the sides of both their hands simultaneously. Lowering his wand, Harry simply gestured to them to go ahead and look. They did, and looked as entranced as Harry was sure he and Ginny had. Then they looked at each other, beaming, then stepped forward and kissed each other as the assemblage applauded.

Neville and Hermione turned to Harry; Hermione stepped forward first, and wrapped her arms around him. "I bet Flora and Fawkes loved it," he whispered.

"I bet they did," she said, laughing. "Thank you, so much."

He kissed her on the cheek as he let her go. "Thank you, for asking me." He turned to Neville, who took a step toward Harry and hugged him.

“Thanks for that, and for the message,” said Neville with emotion. “Also, thank Albus and Fawkes for me.”

“I will,” Harry assured him, patting Neville’s shoulder as they separated. “And, congratulations.”

Ginny hugged Neville, having just finished with Hermione, and then stood next to Harry. They put their arms around each other as they watched Neville and Hermione make their way through the guests, hugging everyone. Ginny leaned into Harry and whispered, “I’m waiting to see what happens when they get to McGonagall.”

“You’re mean,” he whispered back, chuckling.

“Tell me you’re not curious too,” she responded.

“Well, now I am,” he admitted as she laughed. In a few seconds, to Harry’s mild surprise, McGonagall hugged both Hermione and Neville. He and Ginny exchanged impressed looks, and they continued enjoying the scene. I don’t often get a chance to be this happy, he thought. May as well make the most of it.

The vacation continued to move along quickly, much too quickly for Harry’s taste. There were two Auror training sessions in the second week, and Ron tried to get Harry and Ginny outside on brooms twice a day when Harry wasn’t training.

On the afternoon of the thirtieth, Molly and Pansy were out shopping; Harry and Ginny suddenly appeared in the living room, holding each other and Fawkes. Sitting on the sofa, Hermione and Neville greeted them, and they sat next to each other in chairs.

“I was going to mention this this morning, but I forgot,” said Hermione. “You’ve said that for your Joining of Hands, there’s only one... volume for contacting each other, right? Your hand tingles at just one level of intensity? We’ve discovered that if we focus, the tingling can get more intense.”

“Oh, good,” said Harry. “I’m glad it worked.”

The others were surprised, especially Ginny. “You did that deliberately?”

Harry nodded. "It was a thought I had when I was reading what Albus wrote about it, that it would be nice to be able to do that, to wake the other person up if you wanted to. When I was doing the spell that night, I added that to the... visualization, I guess you could say. I made it part of what I wanted to do. I wasn't sure whether it would work or not, though."

"You can do that?" asked Ginny, looking at Hermione as well as Harry. "Just change a spell, even a complicated one?"

Harry shrugged. "He can, anyway," said Hermione. "Somehow I don't think I could. I can't even do that dog spell, and he learned it in one minute. I think it's partly because he can't explain how he does it, he just does it. The energy of love does seem to affect him differently than the rest of us."

"I've told you exactly what Albus told me," protested Harry.

"Yes, and it doesn't work," said Hermione, as if Harry were responsible for the fact. "Maybe he knows you're different and that it would work for you, I don't know. But it can't be an energy-of-love thing, because the rest of us can't do it."

"Not that we don't appreciate what you did," put in Neville, with a glance at Hermione. "We think it'll be really helpful."

"Yes, obviously," agreed Hermione. "I wasn't suggesting otherwise. I was just commenting on the other thing."

"You're just unhappy that Harry doesn't show his work in Transfigurations," Neville teased her.

"Well, that too," she admitted. "It's just annoying that I have to know every last detail of how a spell works before I can get it to work, and he can just make them up."

"I wonder if Voldemort can do that..." mused Harry. To the others' surprised expressions, he added, "Well, remember that part of the prophecy, about my being his equal. What if this doesn't have to do with the energy of love, exactly, but just works better with it? What if he has some ability to come up with spells out of the clear blue sky, and I just got this from him?"

“If that’s true, I’d say you’re using the skill a lot better than him,” joked Ginny.

“It’s an interesting idea,” said Hermione thoughtfully. “There’s no way to know, of course, but it makes as much sense as anything else. Maybe you should ask Snape, see if he knows of any unusual ability of Voldemort’s. How’s he doing, by the way?”

“Pretty well, I just talked to him this morning. There’s really not so much to talk about anymore, about his condition, since the discomfort was gone a few days ago. Now, I try to think of things to talk to him about before I go. He can tell I’m doing it, and he’s made fun of me for it a couple of times, but not in a mean way, and I don’t care anyway. I think he’s happy for the company, even if he’d pretend otherwise. I asked him how he felt about the executions, partly out of curiosity, and partly to see how he’d react.”

“Like, would he be bloodthirsty, that kind of thing,” said Hermione. “I assume he knew that you were doing that, too.”

“He always has been pretty observant, so yes. The first thing he said was that they should die by the slowest and most painful method possible. I said that if he didn’t want to tell me, he should say so. Then, he smiled—just a tiny one, and quickly, but I’m pretty sure he did. I think it was a, ‘at least you’re not so stupid that you figured out I was kidding’ kind of thing.”

Neville spoke as Harry was pausing. “Well, it’s nice that you’re so pleased that his insults aren’t quite as scathing as they used to be.”

Harry was surprised not so much at what Neville said, but at the way he said it. Usually when Neville made a comment intended to be humorous, it was said innocently, or with deliberate understatement. Here, Harry felt, there was an edge to Neville’s tone, almost hostility. Not even conscious that he was doing so, Harry sighed. He almost started to explain why he was happy, then he realized that this had come up before, and that Neville simply wasn’t all right with Harry being happy for Snape. I shouldn’t bother trying to convince him of anything, thought Harry, I

just have to let him get used to it. “Well, he’s doing better, anyway,” he said to Hermione as casually as possible, aborting the rest of the story he’d planned to tell. Hoping to avoid an awkward silence, he changed the subject. “I also saw Archibald while I was there. He said that with the executions today, the Ministry was practically shut down; lots of people were put on various kinds of guard duty, and even those that weren’t, weren’t concentrating much on their work. And, of course, some people are on winter holiday anyway.”

Harry stopped talking as the fireplace lit up, and Ron walked out. “I would ask ‘how’d it go,’ but that doesn’t seem very...” He shrugged, at a loss for a word.

Ron nodded. “I know what you mean.”

“What?” asked Hermione. “Where were you?”

“They’re doing them every ten minutes,” Ron explained to Hermione somberly. “Malfoy’s was at three-ten. I watched his.”

Her eyes went very wide, as did Neville’s. Harry and Ginny didn’t react, as Ron had told them while practicing Quidditch the day before. “Why?” asked Hermione in disbelief. “It wasn’t...”

“No, it wasn’t Schaden-whatever,” said Ron, seemingly annoyed that she would have thought it, but trying not to show it. “I felt like... like I owed it to Pansy, to see it happen with my own eyes, so I could be sure. They’re checking everyone, as an extra precaution, with something Charmed to detect anyone who’s used Polyjuice Potion. So, I’m as sure as I can be that it was really him. He’s gone, I can tell Pansy that he is, and that’s one less thing for her to worry about. Not that she was so worried, while she’s here and with us, but you know what I mean. Just the idea.”

Harry definitely knew, and thought it was very good of Ron to have done it. “What was it like?” asked Hermione, concerned for Ron.

“Not exactly fun,” said Ron. “There’s this strange feeling, when you’re sitting there, and you know they’re going to kill someone. Like it’s not quite real. There were seats there for people who wanted to witness it, about fifty. Kingsley

said that people were standing in line. Some were relatives of the people they killed. I talked to Kingsley yesterday, and he made sure I got a seat for Malfoy.

“Funny thing is, they didn’t Silence them. I’d have thought they would have, but I guess they figured if they’re going to kill people, they’ll at least let them say whatever they want to say before they die. The condemned people are held in place, but they can move their heads. Malfoy looked out and saw me, and started on this rant, on all this stuff he was going to do to Pansy and I once they got him out. It was amazing, it was like he really believed Death Eaters were going to come bust him out of there at the last second. I think they give the person a minute or so to say whatever they’re going to say. So, Malfoy’s going on and on, I was wondering when they were going to decide he’d had enough time. He gets to this part where he says Pansy’s going to like what he’ll do to her. Then he says, ‘I bet she never told you this, Weasley, but the day I left Hogwarts, the day I cut her up, she—’ It was obvious what he was going to say—”

“Sick bastard,” muttered Ginny disgustedly, obviously angry on Ron’s behalf, for his having to be reminded.

“Tell me about it,” agreed Ron. “But just then, they give the signal to the person doing the Killing Curse, in the next room, shielded so no one can see them. Malfoy sees he’s not going to get to say what he was going to say, and gets frantic. He yelled, ‘Not yet, not y—’... then the Curse hit him, and he dropped dead. Someone came in and checked him, to confirm it, and they levitated the body out of there.”

There was silence for a few seconds, then Ginny said grimly, “No matter how awful a story is, it’s always good when it has a happy ending.”

Harry fought back an urge to glance at her reproachfully. Malfoy had tortured her too, Harry remembered well. He looked down, and she glanced over at him. “No comment about that?” she asked, in a tone that seemed both a challenge and an admission that she shouldn’t have said it.

He shook his head. “Just because Schadenfreude is a bad idea in principle doesn’t mean that it isn’t sometimes... extremely understandable. You’re more than entitled, any of us would be. I can’t say I’m not glad he’s gone.”

“When’s the last one?” asked Neville.

“Four-thirty,” said Ron. “They started at eight.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t know they had that many. That’s... every ten minutes...”

“Forty-six,” said Ron. “An hour break at lunch. They also did the Muggles who attacked Hogsmeade.”

Hermione was astonished. “They didn’t just give them back to the Muggle authorities?”

“I think the idea was, they killed wizards,” said Ron.

“Yes, but the reason for us killing them isn’t valid, like it is with the Death Eaters,” argued Hermione. “They would have just been sent back to Muggle prison, they were no particular threat. We killed the Death Eaters because they might have escaped and killed more wizards, but that wasn’t the case with the Muggles.”

Ron shrugged, tilting his head to one side. “That’s true. I’d bet anything it was done because the relatives of the Hogsmeade dead wanted it. We only caught one of the Death Eaters actually responsible, and those people did fire the weapons.”

Very unhappy, Hermione looked at Harry. “This is the slippery slope, Harry. It’s a textbook example, it’s exactly what Albus used to say. You do the first thing, and that makes it easier to do the second...”

“I know,” he said. “I’ll talk to Bright. Not that it’ll do any good now, since this is done, but maybe I can... I don’t know, get him to think about it, to make sure this doesn’t go any further.”

“Yes, he’s a politician, so I’m sure he can be persuaded to do the right thing,” said Neville; Harry imagined that Neville meant for the sarcasm to be less

obvious than it was. Hermione looked at him sharply, and Ron and Ginny had mild looks of surprise.

Is this about the Snape thing, or is he just in a mood, Harry wondered. Trying to keep any emotion out of his voice, he said, "Stranger things have happened." He then turned to Ron and Ginny. "How about some practice?"

Ron nodded. "I was going to suggest it when I got home, actually." They all summoned their brooms as they turned and walked to the door. As Harry walked out the door, without turning, he sent to Hermione: Please don't ask me about Snape anymore when Neville's around.

Two hours later, Bright's secretary gestured Harry into Bright's office. Foregoing the handshake, Bright gestured Harry to a chair. "You should be honored, Harry," said Bright wearily and, Harry assumed, mocking the pomposity of his office. "I've had a long day, and there aren't many people I'd see right now. But I know what you're here to say. I do deserve it, though I thought you might give me a day." Bright sank into the chair next to Harry. He really looks tired, Harry thought.

"Were you the one who went over them with Legilimens?" he asked.

Bright didn't react, though Harry sensed he was surprised. "That wasn't the first thing I thought was going to come out of your mouth. Yes, it was me. I did all of them, including the Muggles, two days ago."

"And this was just before it was suggested to you that the Muggles be executed too," guessed Harry.

Now Bright did raise an eyebrow. "For someone who supposedly doesn't think much, you can be pretty quick."

"On the other hand, I never stopped to think that you might have had a hard day," Harry admitted.

Bright nodded; every gesture he made reminded Harry that Bright was emotionally tired or physically tired, probably both. "You heard about the Muggles,



got on your horse, and came over. Again, not that I blame you. I didn't listen to my conscience, so I get to listen to you. It seems fair."

Harry was surprised that Bright would put it that way. "If you can ignore your conscience, you could certainly ignore me."

Bright chuckled humorlessly. "My conscience hasn't performed numerous acts of extraordinary bravery. That's probably why I don't listen to it." Turning serious, he said, "This isn't intended as a defense, or an excuse... but two days ago, I spent hours going over the minds of people who've committed the most depraved, horrible acts. I saw Malfoy doing what he did to Pansy, torturing Ginny... I saw Lestrange, she and the others torturing Neville's parents, killing Sirius Black and taunting you about it... I saw the same or, if you can believe it, worse, in the memories of every Death Eater. And the Muggles were no saints either, believe me. All taken from high-security prisons, all had killed before, many multiple times. Whoever took them clearly had checked them with Legilimency to make sure they would kill without remorse or hesitation.

"I know that doesn't make our killing them right. But at the end of the day I'd spent doing that, I received a highly emotional appeal from the relatives of the Hogsmeade dead. I should have put them off, told them I'd sleep on it. But I knew without a doubt that the world would be better off without them, that is, the Muggles who attacked Hogsmeade. So, I said yes. Again, the politics of it were obvious, but this time, I would like you to believe that political expediency had nothing to do with my decision."

Harry decided not to apologize for the fact that he was checking Bright. "I sense that you'd like to believe it, too."

Again, a mirthless chuckle. "Yes, that is a problem in a situation where there are two reasons to do something, and one is political expediency: it's hard to be sure that the politics had nothing to do with it. But, still... the timing was amazing, they caught me at just the right time for their argument to be most effective. Once I made the commitment, that was that, I couldn't go back on it. I know what you're

going to say, and it's all true. It's just... I shouldn't smile, the whole situation's so grim, but sometimes you just can't help it. I was just recalling that I told you last week that I was very good at separating my personal feelings from my political actions. It seems ironic that on one of the rare occasions that I let my feelings decide for me, it's in the direction of doing the morally questionable thing, rather than the morally right thing. That just seems like a real indication that I'm not cut out for 'doing the right thing.'" Bright paused, then added with a shrug, "So, that's it. I don't know what more I can tell you."

Harry felt his frustration with Bright dissipating. "Albus always told me to try to look at things from the other person's point of view. Doing that here... you say your conscience hasn't performed acts of bravery, but I'm not so sure. I assume it was what made you decide to do the Legilimency yourself. That's pretty brave, as far as I'm concerned."

"Thank you, Harry," said Bright earnestly. "That means a lot, coming from you. Of course, it's something I didn't truly appreciate until I actually did it. Reading about something in the paper, or a report, is one thing; seeing it in someone's memory is really another. I mean, honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if I had nightmares. And it makes me wonder about human nature, that people can be like that. Madeline... she's been occasionally frustrated with me that I would do such a thing, and mostly, doing anything she can to help, to be supportive. And even though you came here to give me a hard time about what I did, it's good to be able to talk to you about it, too. You're one of the few people I can tell, since it involves my Legilimency. While what I saw was impressive in its sickening volume, you've actually been in situations like this, as well as seen them. You know what this is about."

Harry nodded grimly. "You just get through it as best you can, and have the emotional breakdowns later. At least in my case, I've always had my friends to help get me through it. Funny, how Voldemort has no idea of that at all, that I have this

enormous source of strength that he can't begin to imagine, even though it's very simple, in a way. No wonder love burns away at him."

"That reminds me, I was going to ask how Professor Snape is doing."

"Very well, now. We weren't sure at first, but he's really coming along. It's hard for me to say he's back to his old self, since I never knew his old self. But at least he says he's capable of feeling any emotion. I haven't really seen him actually appear happy; Professor McGonagall thinks it may be because it's happened so little in his life overall, it's not something that comes naturally to him. It just may take some time. But he's not angry all the time anymore, which is a huge improvement."

"You must be proud," observed Bright.

"I suppose I am," Harry admitted. "In a way, I'm just as happy that he got blown as a spy, so this could happen. You have no idea, Rudolphus, how hard it was for him, all those years. I've seen some of his memories, and I can barely believe it. It's amazing that he managed."

"I'm glad he's doing so well, both for you and for him. But... I really wouldn't mind getting home. It's been a long day, and I haven't gotten nearly enough sleep over the past two nights, a fact of which I've been reminded by at least a dozen people today. But I did sort of derail you from why you came here, so if there's anything you want to say that you haven't, go ahead."

Harry shook his head. "Just that... Hermione said this was a perfect example of the slippery slope, but I assume you know that."

"I do. I hadn't thought of it quite that way, but she's absolutely right."

"Well, it'll make her feel better to know this isn't a deliberate policy, anyway. It's interesting, I can't tell the other five the reason you did it, because it involves your Legilimency—"

"You can tell them," said Bright evenly.

Harry was amazed, as he knew how important it was to Bright that the information not get out. "Are you sure?"

“Harry... pretty much everything important that happened with Malfoy and Lestrage that involves you and the others, I saw. Better than before, I know what they’ve been through, what they’ve done. Really, it’s all right. If I can know something like what Lestrage did to Neville, they can know this.”

That made sense to Harry. “I’ll make sure they know not to tell anyone. If there’s one thing I know, it’s that they can keep a secret.”

Bright stood. “I know. And Harry, how’s Neville doing? Did he get back from what happened last summer all right?”

Harry suddenly wondered if that had anything to do with how Neville was currently being about the Snape situation. “Yes, thanks. He had a hard summer, but he’s okay now.”

“Good,” said Bright. Harry thanked him for his time, and left.

Two days later, the first day of the new year, Harry flew through the air on his broom on a cold, clear, winter day. He caught the Quaffle passed to him by Ron, then tucked it into his stomach to foil Charlie’s attempted steal. Taking his Firebolt to full acceleration, he shot ahead towards the hoops. Approaching the far left hoop, he heard Ginny’s voice in his head. “Eight,” she said, as he entered the scoring area. Harry faked a shot on the left hoop, then in the same motion, not turning to look, he threw the Quaffle behind him and to his right. He flew down into a 180-degree turn, righting himself as soon as he got out of the scoring area. He looked up just in time to see Ginny throw the Quaffle through the right hoop.

“All right, let’s take a break,” shouted Charlie, and they all set down. Charlie regarded Harry, Ginny, and Ron with a mix of admiration and suspicion. “As a practice, what’s going on here is fine. As a competitive match, it’s a farce. Harry, I really want to know how you’re doing that. You’ve made a dozen blind passes to Ginny, and every one has been exactly on target, or very close. Did you put some spell on yourself to give yourself eyes in the back of your head?”

“No, but that’s not a bad idea. Hermione, maybe you could research that.” Hermione and Neville had, to Harry’s surprise, joined Pansy to watch. “This is all Ron’s idea. You know, of course, that the hard part of one Chaser bearing down to score and then passing off to another is that you have to turn and look to see who’s where, and who’s open. With the Firebolts, we can be pretty sure that we’ll be open. As for location... Ron’s divided the playing area into nine sections, or lanes; three left, three center, and three right. Ginny flies about five seconds behind me, in a specific lane, and tells me on her hand which lane she’s in. If I have an easy shot, I’ll take it; if not, I’ll pass off to her, without having to slow down or turn to look. As Bill’s noticed, the Keeper has to respond to my fake, and by the time he’s finished reacting, Ginny’s in the scoring area, and has a clear shot. We’ve been working on this all week.”

Fred and George exchanged a grin. “Using the Joining of Hands to advantage in Quidditch,” said George, clearly impressed. “I like it.”

“Very devious,” agreed Fred. “We’re very proud of you, Ron, for having thought of it.” Ron rolled his eyes, but Harry could tell he was pleased.

“Is it legal?” wondered Bill.

“I checked the rules,” said Ron. “There’s nothing that says you can’t do this.”

“Amazing,” chuckled Charlie. “I really am impressed, Ron. It makes me want to visit Hogwarts on the day of the first match and watch. It should be something to see. I don’t think they could stop you even if they knew what you were going to do. They’re just going to be spectators, their Chasers, anyway.”

“And what makes it worse is that their Keeper graduated last year, so they’ll have a new one,” said Ginny sympathetically. “I feel sorry for him, or her. First match... it won’t even be funny.”

“Believe me, I know what that’s like,” said Ron. “But that’s the way it is in sports.”

“Good attitude, Ron,” said George approvingly. “No mercy. Heaven knows we never had any. And Harry, that was some nifty passing, for a beginner. Why only you to her, though, not her to you?”

Ron answered. “It’s because Harry has the stronger passing arm. Ginny’s also a slightly better shot, but Harry’s getting better. It could go either way, I just picked this way, to focus on for practice. Besides working on the passing, the main problem has been the timing; Harry has to get out of the scoring area before Ginny enters it. But I think they’ve got that down okay, now.”

Charlie shook his head in wonder. “I definitely have to see this. Fred, George, can you think of any ways to stop them?”

“You mean, that don’t involve mayhem?” asked Fred.

“Ideally,” replied Charlie.

Fred and George exchanged a look, then shook their heads as one. “There’s just nothing we can do,” concluded Fred. “Even double-teaming wouldn’t help, since they can just fly faster. What we should do now is let the three of them practice defense. The brooms will allow for more chances for stealing the Quaffle, not to mention intercepting passes. The Gryffindor Keeper won’t be experienced either, so Ravenclaw’s only hope will be to score often enough to keep it close enough to allow time for their Seeker to get the Snitch. So, let’s see how you do.”

They practiced defense for a half hour, after which Charlie predicted that that Gryffindor would take at least twice as many shots on goal as Ravenclaw. As they headed back to the house, Harry and Ginny’s arms around each other, Harry thought about how strange it would be to practice as a Seeker for the next month, knowing he wouldn’t be playing the position.

The end of another vacation, thought Harry, as he carried his trunk downstairs. It went by too fast, especially when things went well, which they had after a rocky beginning. He thought about how, this year, he would often think in terms of things being the last time, during his student years at Hogwarts. His last

ride in to Hogwarts on the Hogwarts Express, his last Halloween feast, his last Christmas vacation... and soon, his last Quidditch match. Okay, he thought, not until June, but it's still too soon.

He sat at one end of the sofa, next to Ron. Ron looked up in mild surprise, and asked, "What are you going to do if Ginny comes down?" referring to the fact that Ginny wouldn't be able to sit next to him.

Remembering what had happened before they left for Hogwarts at the beginning of the year, Harry casually said, "Oh, she can sit on my lap."

Hermione and Pansy laughed. Ron looked around nervously—Harry assumed it was mostly for Pansy and Hermione's amusement—then moved over to the other end of the sofa. Laughing again, Pansy said to Harry, "She might sit on your lap anyway, of course." She then got up, walked to the sofa, and sat in Ron's lap.

Now Harry and Hermione laughed, as Ron tried not to look discomfited. "Well, now that it's my lap that's getting sat on, it seems all right to me."

"Amazing what a change of perspective can do," said a smiling Pansy, who then leaned in and kissed Ron.

Harry and Hermione exchanged a smile as Ginny came down the stairs and into the living room. "Everything's as usual down here, I see," she said, grinning. "Ron, you're so shameless."

Harry and Hermione laughed again. Ron broke off from the kiss to say, "I'm not going to dignify that with a mmf—" Pansy kissed him again, cutting off his response.

"Apparently not," said Hermione, amused. She looked at Harry, and Harry got an impression of Neville upstairs, wanting to talk to him. Included in the impression was the idea that he had told her on his hand.

Harry wondered why she hadn't said it verbally, then guessed that it was something Neville didn't want people asking about. He kissed Ginny, got up, and went upstairs. Neville was in the boys' bedroom, sitting on his bed, packed trunk

next to him. Harry sat on Ron's bed, opposite Neville. "I was just thinking, after I asked Hermione to have you come up here, that if for some strange reason I needed to get a message to Ginny without the pendants, I could... through four intermediaries."

"True," said Harry. "It could get garbled in the phoenix translation, though."

"You and Hermione seem to do okay with that," observed Neville. Harry nodded, but said nothing, wondering where Neville was going with this. "It's interesting, she's told me that there can be difficulties when you're trying to get across standard human ideas, communicate facts... but when the subject is feelings, there's never any doubt, and some things can be communicated that would be very hard to do with words. I admit, sometimes I envy you that. Don't worry, that isn't what I wanted to talk to you about, I'm just thinking out loud. It doesn't bother me like it does Ginny."

"I assume she's talked to you about it," guessed Harry.

"Of course, I was the first one she did. Then after that thing the day you found out about Blaise, we had a long talk about it." Harry understood that Neville would be the natural person for Ginny to talk to about her feelings, since he was in the exact same position that she was. "I think I helped her a bit, she said I did, anyway."

"I'm glad," said Harry sincerely.

"I know. You didn't ask for this, and it would be ridiculous to ask you not to use it. If you can help each other with it, then you should. And thinking about that reminds me... she told me what you sent her the other day."

"I didn't mean for it to be insulting," said Harry, unable to tell from Neville's manner whether he was offended.

"She told me that," said Neville. "She spent a few minutes trying to describe your mood; she said that you were mainly frustrated. That you could understand why I'd have a problem with it, but that you felt I was taking it out on you for



something that wasn't your fault. Also, that I was raining on your parade a bit; here you'd done something incredible, difficult, and stressful, it came out well, but you couldn't enjoy it if I was around."

"She could tell all that from what I sent her?" asked Harry, surprised. "I hadn't even thought about my mood in that much detail."

"She can tell your mood from anything you send her. Didn't you know that?" Harry shook his head. "You should mention it to her, I think she thinks you can do the same with her. She says your mood is in the background, at least, of everything you send, the phoenixes send it along."

"Anyway... the reason I asked her to send you up is that I wanted to apologize for how I've been with you recently. You don't deserve it; you did deserve a vacation as relaxing as possible, especially after that teachers' meeting, and the business with the executions. Instead, you have to listen to me being snotty with you. I'm sorry about that. I... obviously still have lots of issues with Snape, but I'll try not to put them onto you."

"I appreciate it, Neville. I know this isn't easy, it was hard for me to get past this kind of thing when I started changing how I dealt with him. But, you know, the irony is—and I'm not trying to defend him—that in a way, the person you have issues with doesn't exist anymore. The only connection he has with that is that the whole person chose to be Cleansed, and so much has happened since then, he's a very different person than he was before he was Cleansed."

"I know that, in a way... but in a way, it doesn't make a difference. I don't think this is something you can just decide like that. He harassed me so badly all that time, I don't think I can change the way I think about him until I see it for myself, and that doesn't seem likely, since I'm not taking his class. I'll just graduate, become an Auror, and never have to deal with him again."

"There might be Hogwarts staff social events," pointed out Harry. "Your wife will be his co-worker, there'll still be some contact."

Neville smiled. "I just realized, I think that's the first time anyone's ever used the words 'your wife' when talking to me. I like the sound of it. But I suppose you're right, I hadn't thought of that. Oh, well, it was a nice thought while it lasted."

Harry almost said, 'Give him a chance, he might not be so bad now.' At the last second he changed his mind, realizing that Neville had to deal with the situation in his own way, and the best thing Harry could do was stay out of it. He just nodded. "So, ready to head back to school?"

"I guess so," said Neville, tapping his trunk to lighten it, then picking it up as he stood. "It'll be nice to have the Joining to be able to use, for talking from bed. I'm always too self-conscious to use the pendants for that, because of the volume you have to talk at. Do you still talk to Ginny before you go to sleep?"

"For at least ten minutes or so, it depends on how much we've talked during the day. It's very nice, but we're still really looking forward to being able to sleep in the same bed."

"So are we. I feel kind of bad for you, you have to wait a year longer."

"Ginny jokes about dropping out as soon as she reaches seventeen," said Harry, as they started down the stairs. He knew she wouldn't, of course, but the idea definitely sounded good.

The next day, Harry was back at Hogwarts, which was the same as ever. The main difference was that Quidditch practice could start in earnest, and the Slytherin second years wasted no time getting out to the pitch in the afternoon, Harry was told later by Ron. Harry knew that Ron was itching to get out to the pitch, but the Gryffindor tryouts wouldn't be held until Wednesday afternoon.

In the staff room after lunch, Harry kept a close eye on Snape to see if he would behave any differently; to his disappointment, Snape was as quiet as usual. The only difference was that the anger was gone from Snape's eyes, and Harry doubted the teachers would notice that. Snape rewarded one of Harry's glances with a sardonic expression, silently needling Harry for hoping for or expecting what

he did. Harry gave Snape a tiny shrug in response, and tried not to look at him again. Soon afterwards, as Hermione walked with him to Charms, she said, "I'd guess that he's specifically trying not to let a difference be seen; it'll be a big enough difference that he's not being totally nasty with people most of the time. I think he wants to avoid questions about why his character suddenly changed. If it's more gradual, people won't wonder so much." Harry could understand that, but he still wished Snape would be his natural self, whatever that was at the moment. Then Harry thought, I guess his natural self doesn't want this to be noticed.

After his sixth-year Defense Against the Dark Arts class finished at four-fifty, a Hufflepuff girl named Cindy Barton approached him as the other students left. "Professor, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," said Harry. "Let's go into my office." He looked up and saw Ginny leaving the classroom, looking at her hand. In a second, he heard Ginny in his head, telling him that she'd be in Gryffindor Tower.

He closed the door behind them and took his seat, gesturing Cindy to hers. "Was Ginny just talking to you?" she asked.

Surprised, Harry nodded. "How did you know?"

"You nodded a little as you walked in here. I felt a little bad for asking, because I know you usually go to the couples' places with her after this class," she said with a shy smile. "It's just hard to find another time to talk to you."

"No, now is fine," he assured her, slightly surprised to find himself not embarrassed at her mention of the couples' places, and by that time, not especially surprised to find that many people knew that. "We weren't going to go today anyway, since we just had all vacation to be alone if we wanted to. So, what can I do for you?"

Her expression dampened as she focused on the reason she was there. "It's about my mother. Well, my parents, but especially my mother. They went to that meeting at the beginning of vacation; they hadn't known you were teaching combat

flying. They told me they don't want me joining the ones who go out to fight if the castle is attacked."

"That's fine, obviously," he said. "I said at the meeting that I didn't think everyone would. If anyone doesn't want to, they shouldn't."

"Well, I want to," she clarified, unhappily. "My mother just doesn't want me to, and she says she can tell me not to, since I'm not seventeen. She also doesn't want me even taking part in the flying part of the lessons," she continued, now indignant. "She wants me to just tell you I'm not joining that part of the lesson, and if you have a problem with it, you could talk to her. My Dad doesn't agree, he thinks it can't hurt for me to be trained in that. My Mum is afraid that if I know how, then I'll go and do it anyway, even though she told me not to."

"Will you?" he asked, ready to check her answer.

She answered honestly. "I don't know. I'm tempted, I'd really like to. I think most of the sixth years intend to go, some, even though their parents told them not to. But I'm their only child, and I know that anyone who goes could get killed. So, I'm afraid of what that would do to them, if that happened."

"You really shouldn't go, then," he urged her.

"But my birthday's in April!" she protested. "I'm so close to seventeen, it's stupid that I can't make my own decision because of a few months. I'm not going to feel any differently then."

Remembering something Dumbledore had once said, Harry repeated it as best he could. "If we don't agree with a law, then we shouldn't follow it, if we're ready to accept the consequences. But if we agree that a law makes sense, then we should follow it, even if we don't like it right then. There's a good reason why children aren't allowed to make decisions like this. They just had to pick an age, and seventeen is the one they picked. Do you think the first years should be allowed to go out and fight?"

“Of course not, but this is different... okay, I see your point,” she reluctantly admitted. “If the age is sixteen, then fifteen-year-olds would say, why not us, and it would keep going down. I really don’t like it, though.”

“I know,” he said sympathetically. “But you’re right, we do have to think about the effect it has on the people we love. I mean, Ginny suffers a lot every time I get involved in something, and a few times it’s been by my own choice—”

“But she signed that scroll,” said Cindy. “I did, most of us did. She knew what she was getting into.”

“Yes, she did. But that doesn’t make it easier when it happens. There have been times when I haven’t thought about that as much as I should. Obviously you’ve thought about it a bit, which is good. I guess I would say, really try to put yourself in their position. Imagine what the rest of their life will be like if something happened to you.”

“But your parents fought Voldemort, they were killed, and that affected you a lot. I read that article...” Harry tried not to roll his eyes, but she could obviously read his expression. “... and I know you said it wasn’t right, but I know it wasn’t that wrong, either. I’ve heard things. But even if your childhood was good, you know what I’m trying to say.”

“I know, and you’re right. It took a lot away from my life.” He looked at her intently. “Cindy, this is the hardest thing about this kind of situation, deciding whether to fight or not. I fight, and a lot of my friends do, but I’ve seen a lot of death. I know what can happen, and I wouldn’t blame anyone who didn’t want to fight, or didn’t want their children to.”

“But if nobody fought, then Voldemort would win,” she pointed out.

“Yes, he would. That’s why it’s such a hard decision. Professor Dumbledore once told me that the... collective intent of a community, I think is what he said, is what ends up deciding situations like this. Each person’s decision adds up, and the more people decide to fight, the better off we are. But each person’s decision to fight is a terrible risk. Professor Dentus decided to fight, and lost his wife, who he

should have had many more years with. Who am I to tell someone they should risk that? People have to make that kind of decision for themselves.” He chuckled inwardly, thinking that Dumbledore would be pleased that he’d said that. “Or, they have to make it for their children, if their children aren’t seventeen.”

“But you’ve said, we have to fight. That was the whole point of your getting people to say Voldemort’s name.”

“That’s a good point,” he admitted. “I guess it’s that I was saying, the community has to fight him. I felt okay about saying that, because it was obviously true, but I somehow feel differently about telling any specific person, you should fight. I don’t think I’ve ever done that.”

Harry could see the concern in her eyes. “Maybe because if you did and they got killed, you’d feel responsible.”

He nodded slightly; he had never thought of it that way before, but it sounded right. He doubted that was the only reason, however. As he was opening his mouth to answer, his pendant vibrated. He reacted with surprise; Snape hadn’t used that to call him since their sessions had ended. “Professor?”

“I would like Messrs. Weasley and Longbottom, and yourself, to meet me in the Potions classroom, as soon as possible,” said Snape. Cindy’s eyes went wide at hearing Snape’s voice.

“I’m kind of in the middle of something, Professor.”

Harry could almost hear Snape stifle a sigh. “And how long do you and Miss Weasley plan to be?”

Cindy giggled, then covered her mouth in embarrassment. “If you must know, Professor, I’m in my office, talking to a student in my capacity as a teacher. But don’t feel bad, that’s what she thought I’d be doing too,” he added dryly.

“I see,” said an obviously discomfited Snape. “At... at your earliest convenience, then.” The line went dead.

Eyebrows high, Cindy pointed at the pendant and mouthed something. “It’s okay, he can’t hear us anymore,” he assured her.

“He was embarrassed!” she exclaimed. “I can’t believe it! A few of the fourth years were saying in the common room that he seemed different, like, not nasty, like he usually is. That’s so strange!”

Harry nodded, and hoped not to be asked a direct question about it. “So, getting back to what we were talking about... are you going to stop coming to that part of the classes?”

“No,” she said. “Who knows, maybe my mother will change her mind. Or, maybe the attack will happen after my birthday. Anyway, I want to learn this.”

Harry wasn’t about to tell her she had to leave a class if she didn’t want to. “Okay, good. I really should go, though.”

She nodded. “That’s okay, I think I said everything I wanted anyway.” As they stood, she said, “You said we could do this anytime. It isn’t for class, though, but just because I want to.” She stepped closer and hugged him. “Thanks for... everything you said.”

“No problem,” he said. As she left his office, he wondered what in the world Snape could want.

“What do you think he wants?” asked Ron ten minutes later, as the three of them approached the Potions dungeon.

With a glance at Neville, Harry responded, “Like I told Neville when he accused me of making the worst joke of my life, I don’t know.”

Neville grunted. “Now I just wish it *had* been the worst joke of your life.”

They entered the dungeon; Snape emerged from his office at the other end of the room. “Please sit down,” he said politely, and they did; he took a seat facing the three of them. “It is my understanding that you, Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Weasley, wish to become Aurors. I am sure you are aware that one cannot do so without a Potions N.E.W.T., or the equivalent. My purpose in asking you here is to offer you private tutoring, with the goal of your learning enough to achieve a N.E.W.T. by the end of the school year.”

Harry wasn't sure which of the three of them looked most surprised, but then guessed it had to be Neville. Ron was the first to speak, managing to ask, "Why?"

"I have recently recognized that my previous classes did not offer an ideal environment for learning," said Snape evenly; Harry struggled not to giggle at the absurd understatement. "I believe you both would do better in such an arrangement as I offer, provided that you applied yourselves. For most students, missing out on the opportunity of a Potions N.E.W.T. is not crucial, but for you, it may be."

Harry was stunned; this was, by Snape's standards, an apology for how he had conducted his classes in the past. He was also impressed that Snape would take on the extra work, but then he supposed that now that Snape was no longer a spy, he had to do something to keep occupied. Neither Ron nor Neville responded, so Harry asked a question. "Could you really get them ready, in such a short time?"

"I suggest two lessons per week, of three hours each. In the six months remaining, that would amount to the equivalent of nearly eighteen months of normal classroom lessons, which I believe should be adequate. I emphasize, do not accept this offer if you do not plan to put in the required out-of-class work; I do not propose this to waste my time."

Harry chuckled at his own expense. "This wouldn't be such a bad idea for me, actually."

"Yes, that is the reason you are here," said Snape, with an amused glance at Harry. "Your performance in the regular Potions class is... adequate, but there are definitely areas in which you could use a refresher. I would be happy to inform you when those areas are coming up."

Harry couldn't help but grin. "Well, if it'll make you happy..."

With a long-suffering air, Snape replied, "It is just an expression, which you know perfectly well."

"An expression you wouldn't have used before," countered Harry.



Snape sighed, then turned his attention to Ron and Neville. “The lessons would be on Wednesday nights at six-thirty, and Sunday afternoons at three o’clock. I would expect, Mr. Weasley, that you would schedule Quidditch practices around those times. Do either of you have any questions?”

Neville’s tone was, for him, almost hostile. “In what way exactly would the ‘environment for learning’ be better?”

Harry saw Snape swallow his irritation. “I cannot believe you do not have enough information from him,” gesturing to Harry, “to know the answer to that question. However... there will be no hostility, attempts at intimidation, harassment, or derogatory comments.”

Harry was impressed that Snape would say that much, but Neville clearly wasn’t. “You just made a derogatory comment to Harry a minute ago.”

“He does not take offense,” Snape pointed out. “As a fellow professor and Head of House, I allow him to take certain liberties. I believe that Professor Potter and I... understand each other quite well.”

“We should, after all that time together,” mused Harry. “So, what do you guys think?”

Still looking surprised, Ron said simply, “I’m in.”

Harry tried not to look at Neville; there was a silence. Finally Snape said, “If you would like to take some time to think it over, you may, until Wednesday evening.”

Neville shook his head. With what appeared to be great difficulty, he said, “No, that’s okay. I’ll do it.”

Harry silently applauded; he knew that hadn’t been easy for Neville. “Very well,” said Snape. “One other thing... if you know of any other seventh-year students who strongly wish to become Aurors, or join some other profession which requires a strong grounding in Potions, but did not achieve the sufficient result to join the N.E.W.T. Potions class, you may inform them of this. If they are interested, I will interview them to determine their suitability.” Translated, thought Harry, that

meant: I'll use Legilimens on them, and they'll only get to join if they're serious about it. Harry couldn't fault him for that, though, since Snape was giving up his free time to do it. "In the meantime, I suggest that you promptly send away to Flourish and Blotts for the proper textbook."

"Okay, thanks," said Ron, in a far friendlier way than he would have ever spoken to Snape before; Harry wondered whether Ron was trying to set an example for Neville. Ron then glanced around, as if wondering whether they were done.

"You guys go ahead, I'll meet you at dinner," said Harry. After Ron and Neville had left, Harry turned to Snape. "What made you decide to do that?"

"I had an attack of conscience," replied Snape, deadpan.

"Uh-huh," said Harry, his tone making it clear that he knew Snape wasn't serious. "Does this mean you'll be changing your standards in the future?"

"I would prefer not to; I feel that the inclusion of weaker students only slows down the stronger ones. However, I should recognize that not every student is like Professor Granger is, or like I was, and not everyone knows by the beginning of their fifth year what career they wish to pursue. I will probably keep the 'Outstanding' standard, but make individual exceptions as I choose, based on interviews.

"Professor," continued Snape, now slightly uncomfortable, "I should not have—"

"Don't worry about it," interrupted Harry, not wanting Snape to feel that he should apologize, though he wasn't sure whether Snape actually would have or not. "I wasn't bothered, and Ginny and I are pretty regular about Mondays at five, so I could see why you'd think that. Actually, we wrapped that up pretty quickly; I was later than I would have been because just when I was leaving the office, someone else came to see me: Ellen Turpin."

Snape nodded. "I assume she wished to apologize for her father's behavior." To Harry's impressed look, Snape added, "I overheard a conversation relating to it earlier. She was apparently mortified at her father's actions."

“Yes, that was basically it,” agreed Harry. “She told me that she had to beg, scream, threaten, and so on just to be allowed back here, that he wanted to pull her out. She wanted me to know that she didn’t blame me, even though he did.” After a short silence, looking at Snape’s expression, Harry said, “I assume you don’t have a whole lot of sympathy for his position.”

“Are you asking because you wish to know if my feelings on this sort of matter have changed?”

“No, it was just a comment. I assume they haven’t. I mean, your problems have been so huge that anyone else’s are going to look small by comparison.”

“I had not considered it in quite that way,” said Snape. “I was more recalling what the headmaster used to say. If everyone were like Turpin, we would lose. Each loss you have suffered has only intensified your desire to fight.”

“Well, yes, but as Albus also used to say, and still does—”

“People must make such decisions for themselves, and we should not judge them,’ I know; I heard it even more than you. His patience, or stubbornness, was remarkable; he knew I could never accept that point of view, but continued to espouse it to me anyway. I still do not accept it; I still feel that it is perfectly reasonable that we judge the actions of others. If we take his attitude, we absolve others of responsibility for their actions, and we all suffer as a result.”

“But he never said that people weren’t responsible for their actions,” said Harry.

“Not judging them almost amounts to the same thing,” argued Snape. “Turpin’s attitude may be understandable, but it is destructive to the community, and should be judged accordingly.”

“You could have been judged, in the same way, over the past seventeen years.”

“And I was, and I deserved the judgments I received,” agreed Snape. “No one judged me more harshly than I did; it was part of what motivated me to continue, despite my hardships. People who judged my behavior did not know that

I had undergone the Cleansing, but it did not matter; since I had chosen that, I deserved to be judged for the consequences of it.”

“But if Albus had judged you, he never would have helped you the way he did.”

Snape nodded thoughtfully. “It may be more accurate to say that if he had been the type of person to judge me, he would not have been the type of person who could have helped me as he did. You are quite right; I suppose it is an irony of the situation. However, the knowledge does not persuade me of the rightness of his position.”

“It’s funny,” said Harry, “I want to be like him, but in more than one way, I can’t quite manage it. Cindy’s parents—she was the one who just came to see me—don’t want her defending the castle, and I was telling her I didn’t blame them. That was true, but I think I implied that I didn’t judge them... but that’s a lie, I think I do judge them, even if I might not want to admit it. I want her defending the castle, I want anyone who would be useful defending the castle. Everyone who doesn’t fight increases the danger for those of us who do.”

“It will not surprise you,” said Snape seriously, “to know that I feel that what you say is exactly right. That has been your attitude from the beginning, when you started your campaign to say his name; you simply did not state it exactly like that. You did say, in the Prophet, ‘there’s nothing else to do but fight him.’ A logical extrapolation is that it means everyone shares that responsibility. If Miss Barton’s parents do not want her joining such a battle, perhaps they should consider joining it themselves.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” mused Harry. “Well, I should go, it’s almost time for dinner.” He stood, and a thought occurred to him; he decided to air it, even though it seemed likely to annoy Snape. “Professor... this isn’t part of some... testing of you, I’m just curious... did you do this partly to make it up to Neville?”

The corner of Snape’s mouth curled up a bit in amusement. “No, I did not. I am not sure how I feel about the notion of personal debts; it seems quaint, in a

way. What Mr. Longbottom suffered from my actions was partly due to his particular weakness of character, and partly him involuntarily sharing a tiny part of my burden, as you did. I almost could not but act as I did, given my situation, and some of those around me shared my burden, the headmaster most of all. I see it as an inevitable aspect of the situation, and something I need not apologize for, or make up for.

“I suppose one could say, however, that a small part of my motivation was the notion that Mr. Longbottom deserved an opportunity to... perhaps the phrase ‘confront his demons’ is too strong, but something along those lines. I respect his bravery, as well as that of all the others—to whom, needless to say, you are not to repeat a word of this. It is ironic; he still quails at the sight of me, despite having faced far more formidable adversaries. I remind him of what he used to be; I evoke his feelings of powerlessness and fear. It is not I that he fears, but what I used to be; he knows this, but cannot simply accept it. It is an adjustment for him, such as we each had to make when you replaced the headmaster in assisting me in July. This will give him the opportunity to make this adjustment.”

Harry nodded, glad that Neville would get the chance. “Well, thanks for answering the question. See you later.” Now, I wouldn’t mind spending some time alone with Ginny, he thought as he headed off for dinner.

## CHAPTER 20

### GRYFFINDOR VS. RAVENCLAW

The next five weeks were unexceptional, both at Hogwarts and in the wizarding world in general. At the same time, it was highly exceptional in one respect: there were no Death Eater attacks at all, and had been none since the executions. Triumphant sounds started coming from the Ministry anonymously, as if the executions had solved everything. Most people felt that this was just the calm before the storm, or Voldemort regrouping, gathering forces once again. Snape speculated that the injury Harry inflicted on Voldemort had motivated him to be far more cautious than before, both in his own activities and those of the Death Eaters.

A long period of unusually bad weather in January prevented most Quidditch practice. Harry suggested that students be allowed to practice flying in Rings of Reduction created especially for the purpose, but as Pansy had predicted, McGonagall vetoed the idea on the grounds that there could be no supervision. When there was a rare pleasant day, teams scrambled for the pitch. To Ron's great annoyance, three of the pleasant days in January were Wednesdays.

"I can't believe it's come to this," complained Ron on the Friday before the second Saturday of February. It was evening in the Gryffindor common room, their books spread out in front of them. "Tomorrow is the first Quidditch match, and we've only practiced five times. Five times!"

"You know what I can't believe?" said Ginny in mock outrage, mimicking Ron's tone. "That's five times you've said that this week. Five times!"

"I have not."

"No," she conceded, "but it sounded good. It's three times at least, though."

“Why do you care so much, Ron?” wondered Neville, keeping his voice down. “You practiced a lot over vacation, and the practicing you would’ve done wouldn’t have been that relevant anyway.”

Before Ron could answer, Hermione did. “It’s the same reason that I’d be complaining if I could only go to the library five times in a month, even if I didn’t need to that badly. It’s just the idea. I think for Ron, the practicing isn’t only a means to an end, it’s partly the end itself.”

“Never thought about it that way, really,” said Ron indifferently. “I’m just glad the weather was so good when we were at the Burrow.”

“Actually, the weather ends up favoring us, doesn’t it?” Harry asked, looking up from his Potions text. “I mean, Neville’s right, the practice wouldn’t have helped that much, but the other teams’ll need it. Especially Corner, if he’s only had the chance to practice five times since he took over as Ravenclaw’s Keeper, he’s going to be in trouble.”

“Seven times,” corrected Ron.

Harry did a double take. “You know exactly how many times Ravenclaw practiced?”

“I asked Colin to keep track.”

“First of all... why? And secondly, Colin watches the other teams practice too?”

“Just curious,” said Ron, a little defensively. “And yes, he does. He practices his announcing, sees how the teams fly, he says it’s like research. He promised the other teams he won’t tell us about anything he sees, like helping us out on strategy.”

“But he’s at liberty to tell you how many times the other teams practiced,” noted an amused Hermione. “And they trust him not to tell you about strategy? With a sister and a brother on the team?”

“Colin has an honest face,” joked Ginny.

“Thank you, Ginny,” shouted Colin, sitting halfway across the common room.

“And incredibly good hearing,” she said more loudly, obviously intending to be overheard.

“Not really,” he replied loudly. “It’s just that thing where you hear your name, even if it’s very faint, and you start listening.”

“Yes, I have that too,” she said. “But with Harry, it’s the opposite. He hears his name, and he sticks his fingers in his ears and starts humming.”

The common room exploded in laughter. As it started to die down, Neville said, “Oh, Ginny, that was very good.”

“It’s funny because it’s true,” added Ron, grinning and watching Harry for reactions.

“Um... we were talking about Quidditch, right?” asked Harry innocently.

“Yes, and you were making fun of me for being obsessive,” pointed out Ron. “See what it got you.”

“You’re right. I’ll never make fun of you again,” said Harry solemnly, drawing a laugh from the others.

Ron made a put-on expression of concentration. “Well, you know, my keen sense of Legilimency is telling me that you’re totally lying.”

“Well, Albus told me that you’re not supposed to use it for—” He stopped speaking as his pendant blinked pink. “What is it, Pansy?”

“Could you meet me in the classroom?” she asked, using the shorthand phrase for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom they had recently adopted.

“Sure, I’ll be right there,” he said, then shrugged as he stood.

“It must be something to do with the second years,” suggested Hermione.

“Maybe they’re nervous about the match tomorrow,” offered Ron. “They want the advice of a grizzled veteran.”

“Well, I am having to shave more and more often, but I wouldn’t say I’m ‘grizzled,’” joked Harry. “See you later.”



A few minutes later, he walked into the classroom to see Pansy and Hedrick sitting in seats, next to each other. “Hello, Hedrick. Are you worried about the match tomorrow?”

“No, should I be?” asked a suddenly anxious Hedrick.

Harry smiled, then Pansy did. “No, but Ron was saying that maybe you had last-minute questions about Quidditch.”

Pansy rolled her eyes. “I love him, Harry, but he really does go on about Quidditch. If we end up together, I’m going to have to become a fan, or I’ll go crazy.”

“It may get better once he’s not captain of the team anymore. So, what’s up?”

Pansy and Hedrick both become serious. “Hedrick had me test him,” Pansy explained. “He’s still at 99.”

“Hedrick, I told you before, you have to be patient—”

“You try being patient when you’re at 99 for over a month,” interrupted Hedrick. “Sorry,” he added with an embarrassed glance.

“Well, I see what you mean about the whole not-being-patient thing,” joked Harry. “Seriously, I can see why you’re frustrated. But it’ll happen eventually—”

“Harry,” said Pansy, giving him a significant look, “I... told him, told them, that you’re a Legilimens. I told them what you did for Ron.”

Harry’s eyebrows went high as he pieced together the situation. “You want me to do with you what I did with Ron?” Looking grim, Hedrick nodded. Harry looked back at Pansy, amazed. “Pansy, I don’t know where to start. I mean, he’s only twelve—”

“I’m going to be thirteen next month—”

“It doesn’t matter whether you’re twelve or thirteen—”

“Harry,” said Pansy loudly, trying to get them both to stop talking. “I wondered if this might happen, and I checked a month ago. There’s no law that says you can’t do Legilimens on a minor.”

“Really?” asked a startled Harry.

She nodded. “If it was for bad purposes, it would be covered under the general law, that adults can’t do harmful spells on minors. Now, of course, there’s the law that adults can’t do any spells on minors who aren’t their children without their parents’ consent, but you’re a Hogwarts professor, and more importantly, his teacher. You can do it without his parents’ consent if it’s ‘necessary as a learning activity.’ I think you don’t have to stretch it at all to say that this is that kind of a situation.”

Harry felt very uncomfortable. Dumbledore had warned him that Legilimency was not a very well understood skill, and people were usually disturbed at the thought of it being done to them. The last thing he wanted was a parent complaining that Harry had done Legilimency on their child. “Hedrick, how do you think your parents would feel if I did this?”

“They wouldn’t care!” insisted Hedrick.

“You mean, you have no idea whether they would care or not,” corrected Harry. To Hedrick’s surprised look, he tapped the side of his forehead. To Pansy, he said humorously, “You did explain everything that Legilimency does, right?”

She nodded. “Oh, yes. I spent a while on it, gave him all the warnings. Could be extremely embarrassing, you could see anything, bad memories, all that. He’s a lot like Ron was, Harry. He doesn’t care. I didn’t just call you as soon as this came up, you know. I’ve been all through this with him, with them. The others say that if they were at 99 for a month, they’d want to do it, too.”

Harry could understand that. He had to remind himself that he’d never had to go through that, having it be a goal he was trying to reach; it had come to him unbidden. To do justice to Hedrick’s feelings, he had to try to put himself in Hedrick’s position.

“Professor,” said a very determined-looking Hedrick, “Okay, I don’t know how my parents would feel. But I talked to them during winter vacation. They’re proud that I’m this close, and proud of how you feel about me. I really do think

that if they find out and aren't happy about it, it'll be at me, not at you. I'm the one that asked."

"Hedrick, I'm not hesitating because I'm afraid that your parents will be mad at me. It's because parents should be able to know—"

"Harry," Pansy interrupted him firmly. "You're worrying too much. This isn't going to hurt Hedrick. It might embarrass him, but there are some decisions that a twelve-year-old should be able to make for himself. I think this is one of them. Don't think so much, just help him. It was important to Ron, it's important to him."

Harry sighed. "I'm sorry, Hedrick. I wasn't comfortable doing this with Ron, and he was seventeen. Maybe I'm just using your age as an excuse." He turned to Pansy. "Would you keep an eye on the doors, deal with anyone who comes by? Not that I think they will, but just in case..." She nodded.

He turned to Hedrick. "Okay, just clear your mind, try not to think about anything at all. You'll see memories come up, just let them go by, and relax. I'm just going to call up some good memories at first, to sort of warm up. Okay?"

Hedrick nodded, clearly nervous but trying not to let it show. "Okay."

Harry cast Legilimens, and called up memories of love. They involved Hedrick's parents, two people who were obviously grandparents, Harry, Pansy, and Helen. Harry raised his eyebrows slightly at the fact that it was Helen and not the others in the group, but didn't linger on the thought. He then called up feelings of friendship, and got more scenes involving the other second years, but with an emphasis on Helen.

I have a feeling I know where this is going, Harry thought. His experience with Ron would now come in handy; unlike then when he groped around blindly, he now had ideas about what to look for. He dismissed the idea of looking for feelings of violence, since Hedrick hadn't had the same experiences that Ron had. Embarrassment connected to love seemed like a much better bet, and he knew he

had to explore Hedrick's feelings for Helen. He felt bad for Hedrick that he had to look, but he knew he had to.

"Okay, now I'm going to look at specific things," he told Hedrick, feeling like a doctor who tried to explain to the patient exactly what he was doing to make him more comfortable. "I'm sorry, but I have to look at—"

"I know," said Hedrick, his expression reminding Harry of how he had felt as a child, naked in a doctor's office. "It's all right."

"Did I ever mention that you're very brave?"

Despite his nervousness, Hedrick smiled. "Yes, once. But thanks."

Harry cast Legilimens again, and called up memories connected to Hedrick's feelings for Helen. One of them was when he had hugged her in the room they were in now; a few were from energy-of-love sessions, where he had focused on her in summoning feelings of love. It was very clear to Harry that Hedrick loved her. He put down his wand, reached out, and took Hedrick's hand for a few seconds, trying to communicate his feelings without words. Then he said, "I need to think for a minute."

Hedrick and Pansy were silent. Harry wondered how Hedrick could be in love at the age of twelve. Almost thirteen, he imagined Hedrick correcting him. He knew Helen was already thirteen, with a January birthday. Can people be in love at that age? he asked himself. Then he remembered that his feelings for Cho had begun at the age of thirteen, even if he was too mortified to act on them for the next two years. Maybe Hedrick's different, he thought, maybe everyone's different. Maybe focusing on love made him fall in love sooner than he would normally have. The thought crossed Harry's mind that most people would refer to Hedrick's feelings as a 'crush,' because of his age. Harry wasn't inclined to think that, because he had seen them for himself, felt how Hedrick felt. Hedrick felt a very powerful attraction to Helen, wanted to be around her, thought of her when he thought of love. Whatever a crush is, Harry thought, this didn't feel like it. But does it have

anything to do with him staying at 99? He decided to look in the area that had caused Ron difficulty, feelings of embarrassment connected to love.

After a minute of searching, he stopped again. "I think this may be it," he said to Hedrick. "I think it'll be helpful to tell Pansy; as far as the situation itself, she might be more helpful than me. But if you don't want me to, I'd completely understand."

"You can tell her," said Hedrick. "But not the others, just you two."

"Of course," agreed Harry. To Pansy, he explained, "He's in love with Helen."

Pansy broke into a smile. "I thought that might be the case. I've seen how you looked at her, a couple of times." Hedrick smiled in embarrassment. "But what's the problem?"

"He hasn't told her, of course. He's... understandably nervous about the idea, and the anxiety that it causes is interfering with his ability to focus on love. If he only thinks about non-romantic love, like his family and his friends, it's okay. But she's the one he thinks of most when he thinks about love, and it always brings up that discomfort. I have to think this is what's causing him to stop at 99."

"I can really understand that," she said, looking at Hedrick sympathetically. "But there's no problem like Ron had?"

"No, there's no embarrassment about the energy of love, or love in general. Just about her."

"Not embarrassment," clarified an embarrassed Hedrick.

"No, sorry," agreed Harry. "Worry, anxiety."

"So, what should I do?"

Harry looked at Pansy for help; she looked no more sure than him. "This is the hard part, Hedrick," he admitted. "The obvious idea is that you tell her, then you'd know one way or the other, and you wouldn't have to worry about it. But obviously, it's risky; it could be very hurtful if you don't get the response you're hoping for. We're starting to get into issues more important than whether or not

you can use the energy of love. I guess you don't have any idea whether she feels the same way."

Surprised, Hedrick shook his head. "Didn't you look for that when you were in there?"

"I only saw what you saw," he assured Hedrick, "and I didn't look at anything I didn't think I had to."

"Oh. No, I don't know, but I'd be amazed if she did. I know we're really young, I just... I can't help how I feel. I didn't know that this would be the problem, and now that I know it is, I still don't know what to do. I'm really scared of telling her."

Harry's heart went out to Hedrick, and he could see that Pansy's did, too. "If you don't tell her, then honestly, I don't know what you could do to change the situation. Love is really powerful, it can't be ignored. I know, I've tried," he added with a self-deprecating smile. "Strictly from an energy-of-love standpoint, telling her is the thing to do. If you don't get the answer you want, it would be really hard, but then at least you'd know, and you'd have to work out what to do from there. But of course, there are other things to consider than the energy of love. I can tell you that even if she didn't feel the same way as you, she still loves you as a friend, and would be nice about it, would try hard not to hurt you."

"But even if she doesn't want to hurt me, if she doesn't feel the same way, it'll hurt a lot," said Hedrick quietly. "I know that much."

"Yes, it will," agreed Harry. "That's why I don't want to say that you should do any particular thing. You know what the choices are; you have to be the one to decide what risks to take, what you can live with." This theme keeps coming up, thought Harry as he watched Hedrick agonize over what to do. First with Archibald over whether I would fight the executions, then when talking to Cindy about whether or not to fight Voldemort. Then he remembered what Dumbledore had said after he had returned from the Chamber of Secrets, that 'our choices define who we are.'

Just then, Hedrick looked at Harry. With a mix of queasiness and determination, he said, "Send a dog for Helen."

Harry almost asked if he was sure, but then realized that he shouldn't try to dissuade Hedrick, or give him doubts. Before he could summon the dog, however, Pansy said, "Wait a minute, it's five to nine, and they have to be back by nine." Hedrick gave her an accusatory glance. "I'm sorry, Hedrick, but I am Head Girl, I have to think about things like that."

Harry tapped his pendant. "Black," he said, and waited.

"Yes?" came Snape's voice; Hedrick gave a start.

"Professor, I'd like your permission for Hedrick and Helen to be out of Slytherin for a while after nine o'clock."

He could imagine the look on Snape's face. "For what purpose?" came the reply.

Hoping Snape would accept it, he said, "It's a class-related activity. It's important."

There was a short pause. Finally, Snape asked, "Where will they be?"

Thank goodness, thought Harry, he's going to allow it. "In the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom."

"They must be in their dormitories by eleven, and they must be supervised."

"I understand, Professor, thank you." He broke the connection, then conjured the dog, which went trotting off. Hedrick looked amazed, which didn't surprise Harry. "Hedrick, I'd rather you didn't go repeating that to people. I know everyone's speculating on why he changed. I do know why, and all I can say is that it's personal. If I were him, I wouldn't want everyone speculating about it."

"Maybe he's speculating about why you asked that," suggested Hedrick. "Thank you for not mentioning it." Harry wondered whether Hedrick would notice the connection, that both he and Snape had something they didn't want people wondering about.

“One of us has to stay,” Harry said to Pansy, “but obviously we shouldn’t be in the room with them. Maybe whoever stays should stay in the office, while the two of them are in the classroom. We shouldn’t be able to hear them, if they keep their voices down. That should satisfy Professor Snape’s idea of supervision.”

“Maybe I should be the one to stay,” suggested Pansy. She looked like she was thinking of saying something else, but stopped herself. Harry thought he understood: if things didn’t go well, the one who remained might be asked to be involved in the conversation, and Harry wasn’t sure he felt up to that.

“Sure,” agreed Harry. “I’ll have to wait until she gets here, of course, then I’ll go back to Gryffindor Tower.”

They waited a few more minutes, then Helen entered the room, looking at Harry expectantly. “Professor? Is everything okay? Did it work?” She looked at Hedrick, who was clearly even more nervous, now that she was there.

“I’ve done what I can,” he said, standing to leave. “But it’s not just a matter of knowing what it is, but also doing something about it. There’s something he needs to talk to you about.”

She looked at Hedrick with concern. “I’ll do anything I can to help, of course,” she said earnestly, obviously thinking that he needed the help of someone who had already reached 100. “But you’re not staying to help?”

He shook his head. “Like I’ve said, I’ve done all I can; at this point, it’s better if I’m not here.” Giving Hedrick’s shoulder a squeeze, he left the room. I sure hope this works out, he thought.

As Harry finished his breakfast the next morning, he looked down the table to see how his teammates were doing. Dennis and Andrea seemed fine, but Eric and Lydia looked nervous, especially Eric. Harry could understand why a second year would be intimidated at playing for the first time in front of people. He made eye contact with Ron, then glanced in Eric’s direction. Ron nodded, walked over, and sat down next to him.



“This is really going to be interesting,” said Ginny, sitting next to him. “So, still nobody knows that I have my Firebolt?”

“I don’t think so, no,” he answered, looking around occasionally to see if the Aurors had arrived. “Nobody’s said anything, and people are used to your using a Firebolt in practice, they think it’s Ron’s.”

“Probably they didn’t notice anyway,” she said, smiling. “After all, we only practiced five times.”

“Seems like more than that, somehow,” he chuckled. “Ah, there they are.”

Neville had already stood to greet Winston, Tonks, and Cassandra; Harry assumed that, as with his and Ginny’s trip to the Golden Dragon, they had gone out of their way to volunteer for this duty, especially Winston. He walked over to greet them, happy to see them even though he saw them once a week anyway, for their energy-of-love sessions.

Helen came over to hug her father. “My little girl, in her first Quidditch match,” he said teasingly.

“How are you doing?” asked Harry. “Are you nervous?”

“No, I’m not,” she said. Giving him a significant look, she added, “Hedrick was nervous last night, but he’s fine now.”

Harry smiled, understanding her message. “That’s good, I’m glad. I hope you do well.”

“It’s hard to say, so soon, but I think it looks hopeful,” she said, pleased that he was happy.

“Oh, I think it’s more than hopeful, you’ll definitely beat them,” said Winston confidently, unaware of the meaning of Harry and Helen’s conversation. “You had all that flying practice, you’ll do great.”

Harry walked back to his seat; Ron took his at the same time, having returned from talking to Eric. “He’ll be okay, it’s just the usual nervousness,” said Ron. “By the way, I’ve decided to have Madam Pomfrey read our lineup to the crowd. I was giving the rulebook a once-over in bed last night, and there’s

something about having to announce when you make changes in your lineup. I don't think that applies to the first match of a season, but I want to do it anyway. I don't want Corner complaining that we're doing something underhanded when you and I don't take our usual positions."

"Good idea. He'll be fit to be tied when he sees we have three Firebolts." Harry remembered how Corner had complained about him having bought Ron the Firebolt last year.

"I'll be so sorry to see that," said Ron mockingly. Harry wondered if Ron's dislike of Corner was due to Corner's having dated Ginny two years prior, or from his comments about the Firebolt. "Okay, everyone, time to go. We're up first."

They headed out to the changing rooms; the weather was overcast and cold, but rain didn't appear to be a danger. After they had changed, Ron informed the rest of the team of the lineup changes; they were stunned, especially Dennis and Andrea, who would be playing positions they had barely practiced at. As they left the changing rooms and walked to the pitch, Dennis said, "Good thing you didn't tell us a week ago, I'd have been a nervous wreck. This way, I'll only be a nervous wreck for a few minutes, until the match starts."

"Relax, Dennis, it'll be fine," Ron assured a not at all reassured Dennis. "We'll score so much it won't matter if they do a bit. Just keep cool, you'll get better as you go. And keep in mind, you can't do any worse than I did in my first go as a Keeper."

"Somehow, that doesn't make me feel any better," said Dennis uneasily.

As Ron walked over to Madam Hooch, Harry looked up at the flags flying over the pitch; they indicated that there was very little wind. Good, he thought, the passing should be no problem. As they entered the pitch he looked up into the stands for Hermione, Neville, and Pansy, and found them in their usual place between the Gryffindor and Slytherin sections. He wondered if McGonagall was going to give some kind of speech, as Dumbledore had last year, but realized that she had nothing in particular to say. She had already said that Hogsmeade days

would, this year, not be held on days of Quidditch matches, as it would be something Death Eaters could predict and prepare for.

Madam Hooch spoke into a magical microphone. “Good morning. A note before the first match begins: I have been advised by Gryffindor captain Ron Weasley of changes in Gryffindor’s usual lineup; he wishes to be on record as having properly advised all present of the changes, so I will read them.” She gave Ron a skeptical glance, as if her time was being wasted; Harry supposed Ron had had to push to convince her to read them. “The Gryffindor lineup is as follows: at Beater, Lydia Kepler and Eric Kepler. At Chaser, Ginny Weasley, Ron Weasley, and... Harry Potter,” she read, not bothering to hide the astonishment in her tone. Harry could hear the crowd murmuring, and stunned expressions on the faces of the Ravenclaw players. Recovering, Madam Hooch continued, “At Keeper, Dennis Creevey. At Seeker, Andrea Creevey. Captains, shake hands.”

Suspiciously, Corner offered his hand to Ron. “What are you lot up to?”

Ron couldn’t keep a smile off his face as he shook Corner’s hand. “You’ll be finding out very soon.”

Colin began his commentary. “Welcome to another year of Quidditch, and the big news is that Harry Potter and Ron Weasley have abandoned their usual positions to join Ginny Weasley at Chaser,” he said breathlessly. “One assumes this is to make full use of their outstanding Firebolt brooms. This is an enormous surprise; no one knew they were planning to do this, and they practiced at their usual positions. Whatever experience those two have at the Chaser position is something I don’t know... and the action is underway. Potter zooms up and snatches the Quaffle, and immediately heads for the Ravenclaw goal. Corner barely has a chance to set up shop, and Potter shoots and scores!” shouted Colin excitedly as the crowd cheered. “Oh, my, that was amazing, he made the shot from twenty feet out, barely within the scoring area. In an audacious move, Potter is announcing that he’ll take a shot from anywhere in the scoring area. Corner wasn’t ready, as he wasn’t expecting Potter to—intercepted! Ron tips, then catches, a pass he would

never have gotten to if not for the Firebolt! He passes to Ginny, who races over to... wait, I believe she has a Firebolt too! Potter races alongside her, a foot away, outpacing the Ravenclaw defenders... yes, I think all three Gryffindor Chasers have Firebolts! Another surprise, and it explains further the lineup—Potter shoots again from the edge of the scoring area, and again it's in! Unbelievable! Twenty-zero Gryffindor!”

As he flew back to defend, Harry smiled, thanking Ron mentally for suggesting he practice that shot at the Burrow. It was a difficult shot, but Ron had explained that if he could make two early on, he could establish a game-long advantage over the Ravenclaw Keeper by making him go for fakes from further out than usual.

“Corner passes to Boot, who heads downfield, Ron all over him. Ooh, there comes a Bludger from Lydia, and both Ron and Boot have to duck. Boot takes advantage of the distraction to break clear for a moment and pass to Stanton, who races toward the Gryffindor goal, Ginny covering. He approaches the scoring area, and—another steal! Potter races over, sticks an arm underneath, and pops the Quaffle loose, then grabs it! Gryffindor in possession!”

“Three,” Harry heard in his head. He raced down the field, deciding to pass even if he had a clear shot.

“And Potter races down the right side of the field, Ron to his left, Ginny a few seconds behind. Yes, it's definite, all three have Firebolts, and they are leaving the Ravenclaw Chasers in the dust. Potter approaches the scoring area as Ron peels off to his right. Potter shoots, no, fakes, then passes—caught by Ginny as she enters the scoring area! Corner is hopelessly out of position responding to the fake, and Ginny takes the uncontested shot on left goal from three feet out! Oh, my, what a display! Part of the reason Corner was so totally fooled was that after the fake, Potter made a blind pass to Ginny! He didn't look, but she was right where he passed the Quaffle! Amazing!”

Harry chuckled to himself at how excited Colin was getting, but then he supposed it was very unusual, and the crowd had cheered mightily at the goal as well. He raced back toward the Gryffindor goal to help out on defense, where Ron was smothering Boot as best he could. Boot advanced, holding onto the Quaffle tightly, and entered the scoring area, Ron still with him.

“...Boot moves forward, Ron staying in front of him. Ron can get in Boot’s way, but can’t use his hands in the scoring area. Boot feints right, goes left, Ron briefly goes for the fake, then heads back, but Boot has a clear shot and he scores! Through the left hoop, and Dennis was very much out of position; I think Ron’s body obstructed Dennis’s view of Boot, and he couldn’t position himself properly.

“Thirty-ten Gryffindor, Dennis passes out to Ginny, who passes to Potter, leading him by a few feet with the pass; he speeds up and catches it. Oh, my, halfway down the field and they’re already ahead of two of the three Ravenclaw Chasers, who are going to have a very hard time being a factor on defense. Potter heads in down the center, fakes a shot on the left goal as Corner goes for the fake, another blind pass to Ginny! She enters the scoring area as Potter leaves it, and shoots and scores! She put it into the left goal as Corner was scrambling to recover from the fake!

“I don’t know how Potter is doing that blind passing, but clearly it’s extremely effective. Normally once you’re in the scoring area you have to take a shot, or turn and pass, by which time the Keeper has a chance to reposition himself. Potter’s blind passing takes away that time, and an off-balance Keeper is simply no match for an approaching Firebolt—Corner hurls the Quaffle halfway down the pitch, intercepted by Ginny! That was a risky throw, and she takes it and heads to the Ravenclaw end. She approaches the scoring area, fakes a pass to Potter on her left and instead passes to Ron on her right, her pass leading him into the scoring area. Ron flies in at an angle, almost parallel to the goals, Corner staying with him, Ron stops! Corner flies a few feet too far, and Ron has an easy five-foot shot into the center hoop! Fifty-ten Gryffindor! That maneuver probably wouldn’t work

against an experienced Keeper, but Corner moved from Chaser to Keeper when he became captain, and due to the January rain wasn't able to practice as much as he surely would have preferred."

Ravenclaw missed their next shot on goal, then made the one after that, while Ginny scored two more goals, again from blind passes from Harry, making the score seventy-twenty. Corner called for a timeout, and flew down to talk to Madam Hooch; Ron did as well when he saw Corner do it. Colin interrupted his commentary as the three flew over to where he was sitting, and hovered for a minute. Then they flew away, Ron shaking his head.

Colin resumed his commentary. "I have been requested by Ravenclaw captain Michael Corner, through Madam Hooch, to omit from my commentary any positional references; it seems that Corner believes that my commentary is aiding Potter in making his blind passes. I must say that I personally don't think that's the case, as my positional references are usually very general. However, I'll do as he asks, and try to omit words like 'behind, left, right, below,' and so forth." There was some chuckling throughout the crowd, as well as on the pitch. "I see Potter and Ron smiling, so I must assume that they think this will have no effect. The match resumes, Ravenclaw in possession. Boot to Stanton, who passes to an open Berenson, Berenson advances on the Gryffindor—another steal! Ginny punches the Quaffle out of Berenson's grip from behind, and Ron zooms over to catch it before a surprised Berenson can.

"Ginny, Ron, and Potter race down the field, already past the Ravenclaw Chasers, who were caught by surprise. Ginny passes ahead to Ron, then slows down, hmmm, maybe I shouldn't say that either. Ron to Potter, who enters the scoring area, fakes a blind pass and scores! He just blew right by Corner, who... well, I was going to say isn't having a good match, but that's not fair. Gryffindor has such a huge advantage due to their Firebolts that I doubt a highly experienced Keeper would do much better. Gryffindor has eight shots on goal and eight goals; they have clearly devised strategies to put their Firebolts to maximum advantage.

The big surprise here is Potter, who we already knew was an excellent flier, but turns out to be very good at shooting and passing as well.”

Over the next five minutes, Gryffindor scored five more goals, three of them by Ginny off of blind passes from Harry. Harry smiled to himself as he heard Colin make two separate references to how effective the blind passing was continuing to be; Colin was apparently annoyed at Corner’s request, as if Corner were suggesting that Colin was deliberately assisting Gryffindor.

“Gryffindor with the Quaffle, Ginny to Ron, Ron to Potter. Potter advances, into the scoring area, and puts on a burst of speed and scores! He just passed Corner, flying at an angle to the left, and put it through the left hoop after he was by Corner. Corner seems to not know which way to move, confronted by excellent Chasers on the fastest brooms money can buy, and almost no defensive help whatsoever.

“Boot takes it down the pitch, Ginny on him. He’s into the scoring area, and shoots from twenty feet out! Dennis had no chance to block it, but it just missed, hitting the upper part of the hoop. A very nice shot there from Terry Boot, he almost had it. Dennis passes to Ginny, who passes off to Potter, who... ah, okay, I think we know how it’s working. Potter down the pitch quickly, into the scoring area, blind pass to Ginny who comes in and puts it through the left hoop, and it’s one hundred fifty to forty Gryffindor. As I was about to say, after Ginny passed to Potter, she looked at her hand. My guess is that that’s how they’re doing the blind passing: she tells him on her hand where she’ll be, using their Joining of Hands. Very ingenious. Boot passes to Stanton... wait a minute, Corner calls for timeout again.”

What now, thought Harry, deciding to join Ron in seeing what Corner had to say to Madam Hooch this time. “What is it, Mr. Corner?” she asked, as Terry joined them.

“I want to protest, and ask that Gryffindor forfeit the match,” said Corner; Harry and Ron gaped at each other, wondering what Corner was talking about. “Potter and Ginny Weasley are signaling each other in an illegal way.”

“It is not illegal,” said Ron, a little more loudly than necessary. “Tell me where in the rules it says that.”

“The rules say you can’t communicate in any way other than speaking, or signals,” argued Corner.

“No, they don’t say that,” retorted Ron. “They say that ‘no device shall be used for the purpose of communicating.’ The Joining of Hands is not a ‘device.’”

“For the purposes of this match, it is,” shot back Corner. “And you’d do a lot better in classes if you studied your textbooks as well as you apparently study the rulebook.”

Harry was taken aback at Corner’s attitude. “Hey, what’s your problem?”

“If you want to make this personal, that’s fine,” said Ron belligerently. “But the Joining of Hands isn’t a ‘device,’ it’s more like an ability.”

“Madam Hooch?” asked Corner, ignoring Ron.

She thought for a moment, then gave an answer. “The rules make no specific mention of the Joining of Hands; I assume that this would have been specifically outlawed if it was intended that it not be used for this purpose. I find that the Joining of Hands is not a ‘device.’ Resume your positions, please.”

Harry and Ron exchanged satisfied grins, but Corner didn’t move. “In that case, I want to protest the match on the grounds that the rule against magical enhancement of the players has been broken.”

“Oh, come on,” said Ron disbelievingly, before Madam Hooch could respond. “You’ve got to be kidding. That’s just to stop people from doing things like taking Polyjuice Potion before a match to get a better body. It doesn’t apply to this.”

“The rules don’t say that it doesn’t apply to this,” said Corner. “They just say players can’t be enhanced to improve their Quidditch performance.”



“The rules say,” replied Ron in growing disbelief, “that the enhancements that are illegal are ‘those affecting speed, strength, agility, accuracy, or other enhancements specifically intended to be of advantage for Quidditch.’ The Joining of Hands is obviously not in any of those categories.”

“Yes, it is,” said Corner. “The last one.”

Astonished, Harry spoke. “Are you saying that Ginny and I had the Joining of Hands done specifically so we could use it for Quidditch?”

Corner glared back at Harry, but didn’t respond. Madam Hooch prompted him. “Is that your contention, Mr. Corner?”

“Yes,” Corner replied, not looking at Harry, Ron, or Ginny, who had just joined the group.

Harry was flabbergasted; he just couldn’t believe Corner would say such a thing. “Have you read about the Joining of Hands?” he challenged Corner angrily. “Do you even know what it is? You must not, if you would say something like that.”

“Mr. Corner,” said Madam Hooch sternly, “I find that the Joining of Hands is not an enhancement designed to be of advantage for Quidditch, and I suggest that you not make any further challenges until you find a clear violation of the rules. Play will resume—”

“Just a moment, please,” Harry interrupted her. He turned to Ginny. “Ginny, take over at Seeker, Andrea will take your Chaser spot. And don’t look at your hand anymore.”

Obviously knowing how he felt, perhaps feeling the same way herself, she said, “I understand.” With a dirty look at Corner, she flew off toward Andrea to tell her.

“Um, Harry,” whispered Ron. “I *am* the captain here.”

Harry shoved back the impulse to say that he was Head of House, so he could do what he wanted; he was angry, but knew enough not to take it out on Ron. “Do you have a problem with what I just did?”

“No,” responded Ron. “Just do it through me, okay? Don’t worry, I understand what you’re doing. He’ll regret he said that.” They flew back toward the center of the pitch, where Andrea met them. “You may not get a lot of shots, Andrea,” said Ron, a little apologetically. “When you have a chance for one, feel free to take it.”

“I heard what happened, Ron,” said Andrea. “Not to mention he insulted Colin, too. Don’t worry about me, I’ll try to distract their Chasers. You two have fun.”

Ron grinned, but Harry’s face was still angry and determined. To Harry, Ron said, “Five-three-two-four-eight.”

“Five-three-two-four-eight,” Harry repeated. “Got it.”

Madam Hooch announced the position changes. Colin finished his account for the crowd of the conversation that had just happened on the ground; there were scattered boos, especially from the Gryffindor section, when Colin explained Corner’s second challenge. “Yes, it does seem a bit much,” agreed Colin, noting the crowd’s reaction. “The action starts again, Ravenclaw in possession. Boot to Stanton, Andrea on Stanton, reaches in for a steal attempt and doesn’t get it. Potter joins to double-team Boot, who makes it into the scoring area but can’t find a clear shot, flies down and out of it, passes off to Berenson. Berenson picked up by Ron, who punches it out! Another steal! Caught by Andrea, passes to Ron, up to Potter, who turns on the speed. Potter nears the scoring area, shoots—no, fakes!—blind pass to Ron, right on target, Ron slams it through the left hoop from five feet out! Oh, my, that was done just as well as it was with Ginny. Ron threw that Quaffle quite a bit harder than it needed to be thrown, and I don’t think it’s too hard to guess why.”

Harry focused on the match as he never had before, concentrating on defense so hard that he made two more steals on the next five Ravenclaw possessions. The next four Gryffindor possessions resulted in goals from Ron in the same way as they had before, and in the one after that, instead of passing, Harry just took the shot himself, and scored.

“That’s twenty-one goals for Gryffindor, and what’s more impressive, it’s twenty-one goals in twenty-one possessions. No Quaffles stolen, no missed shots. The score is two hundred and ten to fifty, and now a Ravenclaw Snitch capture will not change the result of the match. If Ravenclaw is to stay in this, they have to start scoring some goals.”

They did, but continued to do so at a far slower pace than Gryffindor. As the match continued, Harry wondered when Ginny or the Ravenclaw Seeker would find the Snitch, but neither did. Half an hour later, the score was Gryffindor five hundred and sixty, Ravenclaw one hundred and seventy. Harry felt as though he should be tiring, but wasn’t; he continued to channel his anger into his play. He hadn’t smiled for over a half hour; his expression was one of grim determination. Corner’s, Harry couldn’t help but notice, was one of ever-growing frustration; he had blocked only three of Gryffindor’s fifty-nine shots on goal; two of Andrea’s, and one of Ron’s.

“And there’s a goal for Andrea, her fifth of the match. As we near the forty-five minute mark, I should point out that while this has been a relatively long match by Hogwarts standards, many professional matches have lasted far longer, some as many as a few days. Dennis Creevey blocks a Stanton shot, he’s having a fine match, especially considering his lack of Keeper experience, or practice. One has to wonder what Hogwarts would do if a match went on for that long; after all, students would have to attend classes on Monday, and get enough sleep. Another goal for Potter, taking the shot himself this time...”

At one hour and twelve minutes into the match, Ginny dove for the Snitch, and caught it. “And there it is, the end of the match,” announced Colin. “The final score: Gryffindor nine hundred and seventy, Ravenclaw two hundred twenty.” The Gryffindors flew down and met on their side of the pitch, near where they would be watching the next match. Harry congratulated everyone with pats on the back, and a hug for Ginny.

“You tired?” she asked him humorously.

“Not really,” he said. “You’d think I would be.”

“Still mad?”

“Less than before, but I still think he’s an incredible jerk,” Harry responded, speaking quietly enough that only Ginny could hear him.

“I thought about letting you two score another few hundred points off of him,” said Ginny, with a malicious glint in her eyes, “but I decided to put him out of his misery. I liked the idea that while you two were doing the damage, I was the one who was in control of how long he suffered.”

“So you passed up a chance to catch the Snitch,” he confirmed, still keeping his voice down.

She chuckled. “I passed up five chances.” He blinked in surprise. “I am a fairly good Seeker, you know.”

“I know,” he assured her. “Especially since you had five chances and Lillian never even had one.”

“She almost had two,” she said, as Colin asked Ron to join him for the post-match interview. “I tried to keep an eye on her without being too obvious about it. Two of the times I saw the Snitch, she was in the same area, and might have seen it too. Those were the times I went into dives, so she’d follow me.”

“You know, most of the time, what you did would make me want to say that it was unsportsmanlike. But in this case, it makes me want to say I love you.”

“I love you too,” she smiled. “This stays between the six of us, of course. Anyone else asks about it, I’ll lie.”

“Fair enough,” he agreed. They sat with their teammates on the sidelines as the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs walked onto the pitch with their brooms, and Colin started his interview.

“And the Star of the Match for the first match is Gryffindor captain Ron Weasley, whose... forty-four goals are, I think I can safely say, a new Hogwarts record. I could have picked Harry, with his twenty-three goals and remarkable passing, but, the main reason I picked you is that... I’d be willing to bet that the

three of you being Chasers, and the element of surprise, was your idea. Would I be right?”

“Well, I’d like to be modest, Colin, but then I’d be lying,” joked Ron. “Yes, that and having Ginny use the Joining of Hands to tell Harry her position, that was mine too. I think neither of them would have thought of using it for that.”

“What do you think motivated Ravenclaw captain Michael Corner to protest that so strongly?”

Ron shrugged. “It wouldn’t be fair of me to guess what he was thinking, and I’d rather not try. I will say that I don’t think he thought for a second that Harry and Ginny had the Joining of Hands done so they could use it for Quidditch; that was clearly a tactic he used in hope of getting the match forfeited.”

“Yes, but one could say that having Harry and Ginny use the Joining of Hands like that was a tactic as well, which made him decide to use his own tactic.”

“That’s true in a way,” conceded Ron, “but what Harry and Ginny did wasn’t directed at him personally, and you couldn’t interpret it that way. What Corner said when he made that complaint was not only rude, but personally insulting of Harry and Ginny. You have to understand, they’re proud of having had that done, of what it means, of their love and commitment to each other. To have someone say that it’s just a Quidditch tactic... well, let’s put it this way. I’m very competitive; I’ll do anything I can to get an advantage. But I wouldn’t say what he said, even if it wasn’t about someone as obviously deserving of respect as Harry is.” Ron’s comment drew some scattered applause, mostly among Gryffindors, but also from the seven Slytherin second years on the field.

“So, I guess we could assume Harry was a bit upset about that,” suggested Colin.

Ron laughed. “Yes, we could assume that. I mean, I was too, and so was Ginny, but Harry... well, I haven’t seen him that mad for quite a while. But it obviously didn’t affect his play; it made him even better, if anything. He didn’t miss a single shot on goal, I think, and his passing was amazing.”

“But the brooms helped, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Oh, absolutely. Let’s be clear, they helped a huge amount. I mean, I think we would have won without them, but they gave us a really big advantage, which I did my best to make even bigger.”

“Is that really fair, though?” asked Colin. “I mean, if you win the Quidditch Cup, aren’t people going to wonder whether it was just because you had three Firebolts?”

“Some probably will, but the fact is that the school’s rule is that private brooms can be used. If the school wanted to make sure all the brooms were equal, they could just change the rule. In the meantime, it would be stupid of us not to use the best brooms we have.”

“As we saw, Ron, Harry’s blind passing didn’t suffer when it was you instead of Ginny. How did he know your position?”

“Every few minutes, we’d meet, and I’d give him a series of numbers, which told him where I was going to be the next few times,” explained Ron. “He knew where to pass the Quaffle based on that. Having Ginny use the Joining of Hands to communicate that to Harry was a convenience, nothing more.”

“So, why did he move Ginny to Seeker even though Madam Hooch disallowed Corner’s complaint? And if I heard properly, that was him who did that, not you, is that right?”

“Yes, he did sort of forget for a minute that I’m the captain,” said Ron humorously. “But I had no problem with what he did, I would have overruled him if I had. He was making a point, that using the Joining of Hands wasn’t important to what we were doing. It wasn’t the kind of decision made with the idea of what was best to win the match, but it was really understandable. Who knows, maybe Corner did what he did on purpose, tried to goad Harry into not using it even though it wasn’t against the rules. If so, it worked, but it didn’t do any good.”

“So we saw,” agreed Colin. “And lastly, Ron, were you and Harry also making a point by continuing to score so much? You certainly could have eased off when you got, say, three hundred points ahead.”

Ron shook his head. “Colin, sports is about going out there and doing your best, all the time. In chess, if you’re hopelessly behind, you can resign, but Quidditch doesn’t have that option. You play until the Snitch is caught, and as you pointed out, sometimes that takes a very long time. If we stopped doing our best, then we’d just be practicing, not playing Quidditch.” Listening to Ron, Harry recalled with amusement that it had been Ron’s original intention to have everyone resume their normal positions once Gryffindor got three hundred points ahead. Guess he forgot about that, thought Harry wryly.

“Thank you, Ron. The Star of the Match, Gryffindor captain Ron Weasley.” The crowd applauded politely as Ron made his way over to where the rest of the team was sitting.

Harry leaned over and whispered to Ginny, “Do you think Ron knows?”

“I’m sure he at least suspects,” she whispered back. “He won’t mind, though, I’m sure of that.”

Ron walked over and sat down, giving Harry a pat on the back. “Remind me never to tick you off, Harry.”

“I don’t think I need to remind you to never imply that my commitment to Ginny means nothing.”

“No, I guess not,” agreed Ron. “Well, at least there was a good outlet for your anger.”

Sitting behind Ron, Harry, and Ginny, Lydia asked, “Do you think he really meant to imply that?”

“I don’t know what he meant to imply,” said Harry, “only what he did imply. I’m not sure I care what he meant. He shouldn’t have said it unless he really thought it.”

Madam Hooch blew the whistle, and the second match got underway. Harry watched intently, very interested to see how the Slytherin second years did. They flew well, he thought, but their lack of Quidditch experience showed, especially at the Keeper position. Hufflepuff had a potent offense last year, Harry recalled, and no changes at the Chaser position. Flying skill and superior brooms kept Slytherin in the match, but this one too went on for quite a while.

After forty-five minutes, with the score Hufflepuff two hundred ninety, Slytherin one hundred eighty, the Hufflepuff Seeker dove for the Snitch. Augustina followed her, and started to catch up, but it looked like she would be too late. At the last second, the Snitch darted up and away, and reacting quickly, Augustina flew upwards and grabbed it. Harry smiled and applauded; as was the case last year with Cho, it was with much more enthusiasm than the polite applause of his teammates.

After the interview, Harry and his teammates got up and started back to the changing rooms. “So, do you think Slytherin’s going to be a threat?” Harry asked Ron.

“Not this year. With our Firebolts, we’ll Banish them, but next year they’ll be pretty strong.”

“What do you mean, we’ll ‘Banish’ them?” asked Dennis. Harry had been wondering the same thing.

“It’s wizarding slang, I guess,” said Ron, in a tone that suggested he’d never thought of it before. “It means, like, to get rid of, do away with. I meant that we’ll beat them easily. Like the other teams, their only chance against us will be to get the Snitch quickly.”

“Maybe you should leave Ginny at Seeker, then,” said a familiar voice behind them. Harry, Ron, and Ginny turned in surprise to see Oliver Wood smiling at them, Charlie Weasley at his side.

“Oliver!” exclaimed Harry, as Oliver extended a hand. “Wow, it’s good to see you. And very surprising. Did you come here just to see the match?”



Oliver nodded as he shook Ron's hand. "We were on the team together my first two years on it. Charlie persuaded me to come, not that I needed that much persuading. He said that something interesting was up, but he wouldn't tell me what it was."

Harry introduced Oliver and Charlie to the rest of the team, then said to them, "Hope we didn't bore you."

They laughed. "It was long, but it was worth watching," said Charlie. "Fred and George came too, they were sitting with us."

"Don't they have the—" started Ron.

"—shop, yes, but the match started at eight-thirty, and they don't usually open until nine-thirty, so they figured they'd have plenty of time," said Charlie with a smile. Turning to Ginny, he added, "They're convinced that you deliberately put off catching the Snitch to torture Corner, for what he said today and for what happened two years ago. They were so proud. But they did say that they intended to send you the bill for the lost profits from them opening the shop a half hour late."

Harry and Ron laughed, as Ginny rolled her eyes. "They would. I don't even think about two years ago, believe me. What he did today would be more than enough to make me want to do that, if I had."

"Not quite a denial," said Charlie, with raised eyebrows.

"As much of one as you're going to get," she responded, a little smugly. "And they could always have left early anyway."

"No, they were having too much fun," said Oliver. "They wanted to yell stuff at Corner, but they were afraid McGonagall would have them thrown out if they did. They loved it when Harry and Ron started the blind passing up again after you moved from Chaser to Seeker. They were making jokes about how Harry must have had another Joining done with Ron, on his other hand."

The whole team laughed, even Harry and Ron. "Now why didn't I think of that," chuckled Ron. "I am so devious, after all."

“I know you want to get to the changing rooms, it was a long morning for you,” said Oliver, “but could you three wait for just a minute? There’s something we want to ask you about.” The four younger members went off to the changing rooms. Facing Harry, Ron, and Ginny, looking like he was about to make a sales pitch, Oliver said, “I was thinking about this before the match, but it seems like an even better idea now. You know I play for Puddlemere United, and you may know that I was just made the starting Keeper this season. I think my teammates would be interested, and I think it would be fun, to have a match which would basically be Puddlemere against the Weasleys. I’m imagining that Charlie would be the Seeker, Fred and George the Beaters, and maybe you three at Chaser, or Harry and Ginny at Chaser, Ron at Keeper, and someone else you choose at Chaser. If the three of you were Chasers, I could be the Keeper, and our reserve could Keep for Puddlemere. What do you think?”

Ron’s eyes lit up; Harry raised his eyebrows, but had no other reaction. “That sounds brilliant!” enthused Ron. “Wouldn’t that be great, Harry?”

Harry was considerably less enthusiastic, but Ron’s reaction told him that he had to be careful not to be negative about it. He did like the idea of the game itself, but was concerned about the ‘Harry Potter’ angle. “This would just be a friendly match, right?” he asked hopefully. “Not something in a stadium with ten thousand people?”

“See, having ten thousand people there would bother Harry,” Ginny said. “Nine thousand, now, that would be okay. But not ten.”

Ron smiled as Harry gave Ginny a ‘that’s not funny’ look. “Sorry, it was just a joke,” she said to Harry with wounded innocence. To Charlie and Oliver, she explained, “Harry hates being a spectacle. I have a feeling that the more people know about this, the less he’s going to like it.”

“I’d love to play the actual match,” Harry emphasized, as much for Ron’s sake as his own. “I mean, we’d get killed, but it’d be great to compete against pros.”

“Wait a second,” protested Ron. “Okay, we’d probably lose, but I don’t think we’d get ‘killed.’ We aren’t bad. I’d Keep, I wouldn’t feel comfortable at Chaser against pros, so we’d have to find another Chaser, maybe Angelina. Let’s put it this way, we’d do better than Ravenclaw just did against us.”

“Which isn’t saying much, but maybe you’re right,” Harry conceded. “Well, you can go ahead and talk to them about it, see what they think.”

“Just don’t use Harry’s name much,” said Ron, to Harry’s gratitude. “Just mention me prominently, tell them they’d get to practice against the legendary Gryffindor Keeper, Ron Weasley. They won’t pass up the chance.” Harry sighed as he realized he was being made fun of again.

“Let me ask you, Harry,” said a serious Wood, “this spectacle thing, is it why you didn’t go out for the Quidditch World Cup position? Because your name could be in the papers, that sort of thing?”

“My name is already in the papers, but I know what you mean.” Deciding to tell Wood something to help Wood understand his sensitivity to the issue, Harry added, “Not exactly, but it’s related. That guy, what was his name... Woodridge, he only wanted me on the team for the publicity, and he lied to me about it. Don’t ask me how I know, I just know. He was going to put me on the team, no matter what. The reasons I told you then were true also, but I just don’t want people treating me that way. If he’s involved in this, I don’t want any part of it.”

“You’re sure?” Wood asked, surprised. “Damn... he did seem excited, but I thought it was because I told him you were really good. Don’t worry, I’ll keep it low-key, just suggest it as a friendly match. I don’t even know for sure that they’d want to, I just think they might.”

Harry still couldn’t help but wonder if his presence in the match would be what would attract the players’ interest, but then he realized that this kind of thing was bound to happen all his life, and he had to try to be less sensitive about it. He had started checking Wood with Legilimens as soon as the subject had come up, but Wood had not lied about anything, to Harry’s relief.

“Let us know, okay?” he asked Wood. “It sounds great.” They chatted for a few more minutes, and Charlie and Wood congratulated them again on the day’s match. The three continued on to the changing rooms.

Harry wondered if Ron was upset at him for his lack of enthusiasm. “I’m sorry, Ron,” he said. “It’s just that—”

Ron waved off his apology. “It’s okay. I realized when you mentioned Woodridge, maybe this is a smaller version of that. If they’re interested, it’ll probably be mostly because of you. I mean, I still want to do it, but if it gets to be a big thing, you can change your mind, if you wouldn’t be comfortable.”

“Thanks,” said Harry. “But I hope that doesn’t happen. It would be cool.”

“Cooler than giving Corner what he deserved?” asked a smiling Ron. Harry smiled back, and didn’t answer.

By the time Harry had showered and changed, it was time for lunch, which he and Neville ate with the Aurors. Due to the Quidditch match on Saturday and Neville’s Potions commitment on Sunday afternoon, their weekly Auror training session was split into two half-days, Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning.

After he returned and had dinner, he had a Legilimency session with Hermione. They each practiced for a half hour; as part of her practice viewing memories, to Harry’s surprise, she decided to call up Quidditch-related memories, including memories of that day’s match.

She smiled at him after they finished. “You know that I don’t care about Quidditch, but when I see your memories of it, it makes me want to take it up. You enjoy it so much, it seems really appealing when I see it through your eyes.”

“Maybe a week before the N.E.W.T.s, I should view your memories of studying, and I would feel the same way you do,” he joked

She laughed. “I don’t think so, somehow. But today, you weren’t enjoying it so much, after Corner’s complaint. It seemed like more of a... grim satisfaction.”

“Or, like Schadenfreude?”

“A little, yes, but not that I blame you at all, obviously. I had never thought of the idea of getting revenge through sports, but you did basically that.”

“Is that why you chose those memories?” he asked.

She nodded. “I just wondered what it felt like for you. By the way, the phoenixes were kind of... disturbed, I guess. They both went off to their natural habitat, wherever that is, and tried not to focus on your feelings too much. I got some impressions from Flora while that was going on.”

“Now I feel kind of bad. When I get like that, I don’t think about how it affects Fawkes.”

“He understands, Harry,” she assured him. “He knows you’re human, that you will get mad sometimes. It’s just that, you know phoenixes have a low tolerance for this sort of thing. It’s why they’re so selective about who they choose, and why people as young as us aren’t usually chosen. We’ll probably both get mad a lot less when we’re in our thirties and forties, which is when people are usually chosen.”

Curious, he asked, “Do you try not to get mad, for Flora’s sake?”

“Yes, I really do try,” she said. “When I get really angry or sad, I try to control it if I can, and sometimes I ask for Flora’s help. She sends me positive feelings, but she also understands that sometimes I just have to be mad, or sad. But at least she can help me not dwell on it any more than I have to. I really don’t want her to be uncomfortable, and so I do what I can.”

“I should do that. I just never thought of it,” he said, now feeling bad that he hadn’t.

“By the way, Mandy and Terry talked to me for a while in the library. Did you know that they’re kind of a couple, by the way?” Harry shook his head.

“Apparently, they started seeing each other over vacation. Anyway, they were talking about Michael. Terry, being on the team with him, had a chance to talk to him a little after the match, not that Michael was really in the mood to talk. He’s been in a pretty bad way since the match.”

“After what we just talked about,” he said with a small, rueful smile, “I find myself trying not to have the feeling of satisfaction that I normally would be having.”

“I can understand that,” she said sympathetically. “Most of this is their speculation, because he hasn’t talked much. They’re both sure that he doesn’t really think you had the Joining done for that reason, it’s just so absurd. They think it was partly a game tactic, like Ron said, but more because he was embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed? What did he have to be embarrassed about? Because we were winning?”

“Not that exactly, but because he was being made to look bad. Maybe it’s a little like how Ron felt during his first Quidditch match—”

“Yeah, well, nobody was chanting ‘Corner Is Our King’ today,” Harry pointed out.

“I did say ‘a little like,’ I know it’s not exactly the same. Nobody was trying to make him look bad. I just mean that Terry felt that Michael was embarrassed that you three were scoring off him so easily. He hadn’t had that much practice at Keeper because of the weather, and then you three come up with this. Mandy thinks it was partly anger from embarrassment, and partly fear at the thought of what he knew would happen, which did happen, that it would just go on. His emotions just got carried away, and he reacted... a little like panic, I guess, where you just want it to stop as soon as possible, you don’t care how. I really think that he did what he did not so much because he wanted to win, but just because he didn’t want to go through the humiliation of being scored off of constantly.”

“And then Ginny made him go through it anyway,” mused Harry, still not feeling any sympathy for Corner.

Clearly noticing, Hermione added, “It’s not like you weren’t entitled to your feelings too, of course. What he said was extremely insulting, they know that. Terry said he kind of cringed when Michael said that. They just wanted me to know that they thought it wasn’t... quite so personal as it sounded.”

“Sounded pretty personal,” grunted Harry, unconvinced. “Why did they tell you all this, anyway? Why not me?”

“Partly because you weren’t around, but mainly because they were afraid you’d still be mad, and they wanted to let you know this, but they didn’t want you to take it out on them. They didn’t want you to think they were sticking up for Michael; they really weren’t defending what he did. They happened to be with me in the library anyway, so they just told me what they thought, and I could tell you if I wanted. I think they just hope you won’t hold it against Michael for a long time, for something that happened in the emotion of the moment.”

Harry sighed a little; he didn’t want to even think about forgiving Corner, though he knew he should. “Well, if he wants to apologize, I’ll listen,” he said reluctantly. “But he really should apologize to both of us.”

“He may not,” she warned him. “Some people find that very difficult.”

“Well, I won’t be holding my breath,” he said. “I don’t really care if he does anyway, I never liked him that much personally. Not that he ever did anything to me, just... I don’t know, his personality rubs me the wrong way.”

“I do see what you mean,” she agreed. “He’s self-confident, a little too much at times; he can come off as belligerent.”

“Like Malfoy, without the evil,” Harry suggested.

“Or the prejudice, or other nasty bits, maybe. A little like that, just in that way only.” At the end of Hermione’s sentence, Harry’s pendant blinked pink. Harry answered it; Pansy asked if she could see him. “Now is okay,” said Hermione, knowing that Pansy could hear her over Harry’s pendant. “We were almost done.” Pansy signed off, and Hermione added, “You probably didn’t care to hear about the Michael situation anyway.”

“Not really,” agreed Harry. “I’d just as soon be mad at him.”

“Again, that’s understandable, but... I hate to mention this, Harry, but I feel like I should. Remember fifth year, that thing you said to Ron, about his Keeping...

you were emotional, you said something insulting because of that. You can see how it could happen.”

“I wish I could deny that you had a point, but you do,” said Harry uncomfortably. “Funny how I’d just rather be angry.”

“It’s probably because you feel righteous. He was in the wrong, it’s natural for you to feel that way, and unnatural to try to empathize with him. I’m not saying you should, but... it’s just something to think about.”

“It’s what Albus would have done, for sure,” he acknowledged. “Well, thanks, anyway.”

She left, and he thought about it for a minute, until Pansy arrived. Sitting down, she said, “Wow, I just had this strong feeling of... nostalgia, I guess. The last time you and I sat in these chairs was... last March, almost a year ago.”

“You were still under cover, trying to figure out how Malfoy was going to try to kill me... and now, he’s dead. Things sure do change.”

“For the better, definitely,” said Pansy fervently. “It’s strange, to think of how much time I used to spend with him. And unpleasant, so I think I won’t,” she added wryly. “I wanted to tell you about last night.”

“With what happened today, I almost forgot about that,” he admitted. “Helen sort of let me know this morning that everything was okay, though.”

Pansy nodded. “I didn’t know much of what happened last night; it was important that they have privacy, so I tried not to listen. I talked to her this afternoon, and she generally told me about it. She was very surprised; having him tell her that was the last thing she expected. She was really flattered.”

“But she doesn’t feel that way about him?” Harry guessed.

“It’s more like she hadn’t thought about it. She considered him a close friend, but she hadn’t thought of anyone romantically, really. Well, she did say that all five of the girls had crushes on you last year,” she said with a smile, as Harry smiled in embarrassment. “Yeah, I thought you’d like that. It wouldn’t have been hard to guess, though. Anyway, she just told him the truth, that she hadn’t thought



about it much. But I'll tell you, Harry, that if she hadn't thought about it much before, she sure has now. It's really powerful, to have someone feel that way about you, especially someone you already like. She was really affected, really touched. She couldn't necessarily say the same thing to him that he did to her, but she didn't throw up a stop sign, either. The way they left it was that they would consider each other 'special friends,' was the phrase she used. I think she just needs time to get used to the idea. But she is happy about it, I could really see that."

"I'm glad," said Harry, now smiling for a different reason than embarrassment. "I think that's about as much as anyone could have hoped for. It was a brave thing of him to do; she wasn't likely to just fall into his arms, like Ginny did with me."

"Well, what you did was brave anyway, because you didn't know for sure what she would say," said Pansy. "But that reminds me of something. You know that the second years heard a third-hand account of what happened with you and Ginny; I told them last year what Ron told me. But Helen and Sylvia saw it themselves, since you put the memory into the Ring of Reduction you did, and they told the others about it, about all the memories you put in there. You know, Harry, they were so honored that you put memories of them in there, Helen and Sylvia both said they were crying when they saw them. Anyway, Helen asked Hedrick last night at one point how he got up the nerve to tell her, and he said that he remembered what they'd said about what you did with Ginny. Knowing that you just charged ahead in that situation made him decide to do it."

Harry shook his head in mild disbelief, pleased at the compliment but chagrined that someone would do something so risky just because he had. "Well, if that's the most reckless thing anyone ever does because of me, I'll be grateful."

"I still prefer 'brave' to 'reckless,'" she admonished him. "It was the best thing to do anyway, and I would have just straight out told him to do it if it wasn't for the risk, and I think you would have too. If you love someone, you need to tell them."

“I’m just happy it worked out as well as it did,” he said. “So, do you want to stay and talk, for old times’ sake?”

She laughed. “I could talk about my low self-image, cry on your shoulder a bit. Fortunately, things are better than last year in more than one way. But I do miss talking to you, just one-on-one like we used to. So, sure, I’ll stay a while. I can complain about Ron’s Quidditch obsession.” Harry laughed, and they ended up talking for another hour.

That night, Harry put on his pajamas, shut the curtains on his bed, and got under the covers. Just as he was about to look at his hand, it started tingling. “Hey,” he whispered, looking at the image of her face in his hand. “Are you okay? You look kind of sad.”

She shrugged, which he could tell even though he only saw her face. “I just had a talk with Hermione. She said she had the same talk with you earlier.”

“Ah, about Corner,” he said. “You don’t feel bad about what you did, do you?”

“Hell, no,” she said emphatically. Then, “Well, not bad exactly, just that it definitely fails the Dumbledore test, doesn’t even come close. He would have just ignored it, decided it didn’t matter.”

“But he wouldn’t have done it at age sixteen, I’d bet,” he said. “And as you and Hermione have told me before, it’s too high a standard to really use.”

“That’s true,” she agreed. “She also told me something she said she didn’t know when she talked to you. This isn’t firsthand, but she heard that Corner has been saying to Ravenclaws that he’s sure that I let the match go on so long on purpose, and he thinks maybe you told me to do that.”

Harry laughed. “Anyone who thinks that I tell you to do things and you do them doesn’t understand the way our relationship works.”

“Well, you did tell me to move to Seeker, and I did it. He probably assumes it’s something like that, maybe you told me on your hand later, or passed me in the

air and said it quickly. I have been asked by several people today if I did that on purpose. To most people, I denied it, but Terry also asked, and I knew he was asking for Michael. I just told him that I wasn't saying, that I'd just as soon he wondered about it. Terry didn't ask anything more, he just left. After that, I decided that if Michael asks me himself, I'll tell him, you're damn right I did, and I don't regret it. He won't ask, though."

"So, what, does he think that Swanson also let the match drag on?"

"I don't think so, but Hermione also said she heard a few things about that. Apparently he was mad at her, too, for not managing to find the Snitch. Where people could hear, in the Ravenclaw common room, he complained about it. He said things like, if Cho could find it in twenty-eight seconds, surely she could find it in an hour and a half. A few other things like that, about how good Cho was, how she caught the Snitch in all three matches last year, even the one against us.

"So, an hour later, at dinner, this got back to Swanson. It turns out that while she may be only a third year, she's no wilting flower. She looked for him, found him in the common room, and gave him a piece of her mind. She told him, among other things, that she was quitting the team, and that he was welcome to bring Cho back if he loved her so much. She finished by telling him exactly where he could stick his broom."

Harry laughed out loud, then tried to keep it down for the sake of his dormitory-mates. "I shouldn't laugh, but it is funny. He deserved what he got from us, and he deserved that, too. I wonder if he's going to wake up and figure out he made a mistake, instead of trying to blame it on other people. First Colin, then you and I, then her. To me, it kind of punches a hole in Hermione's 'it was in the heat of the moment' thing. He insulted her, too, just not to her face. He really needs to calm down."

"Well, I wasn't sad earlier, just unhappy that the whole thing happened. It's nobody's fault but his, though, for sure. By the way, I wanted to say I'm sorry if that joke about the nine thousand people bothered you. I wasn't trying to make fun of

you for being sensitive about that, I really do understand. I was just trying to make a joke, but I should have waited until I could find a better one.”

“That’s okay, I wasn’t that bothered. We all know how you are, about making jokes, and how I am, about the ‘look at Harry Potter’ thing. We’re all just being ourselves, I guess.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” she agreed. They talked for another ten minutes before signing off. He did his Occlumency exercises, then went to sleep.

“Hello, Albus,” said Harry happily, as Dumbledore approached. “I guess you probably have some comments about what happened today.”

“I will be happy to discuss anything you would like, but it will have to be another night,” said Dumbledore, his expression grave. “The attack on the castle which we have long feared has just been launched.”

Oh, my God, thought Harry. I have to wake up. No, wait. Very anxious, he asked Dumbledore, “What can you tell me? What’s happening?”

“There is some time before they will reach Hogwarts, perhaps thirty minutes,” said Dumbledore. “The attackers are as was expected: Death Eaters and non-Death Eater helpers, giants, and dementors. I do not know the quantities involved. Their speed is limited by how fast they can travel to Hogwarts while keeping the giants under magical cloaking, invisible to Muggles.”

Harry wondered why they cared whether the giants were invisible to Muggles, then decided it could wait. “This must be everything he’s got.”

“I believe so,” agreed Dumbledore. “If this battle is won decisively, it could deal a crippling blow to Voldemort.”

“Then, we will,” said Harry, determined. “How do they plan to get past Hogwarts’ magical defenses?”

“They have re-acquired the fourth piece of the Four Corners artifact,” said Dumbledore. Sensing Harry’s incredulity and unasked question, he added, “How it was done is not of importance at the moment. It has not yet been deployed, I

believe; they plan to do so when the giants are near Hogwarts. Deploying and activating it now might give you time to find it.”

Makes sense, thought Harry. “Okay, I should go wake up.”

“There is one more thing. Taking the castle is only his secondary objective; the primary one is your death. You could stay on the sidelines of the battle, but he knows you will not do so. He pins his hopes on the giants in particular. He plans to illuminate you in some way to make you a better target, but I do not know exactly how.”

What’s he going to do, Harry wondered, put a searchlight on me? “Okay, thanks, Albus. See you tomorrow.”

Harry woke up, then bolted upright in his bed. He almost woke Ron and Neville, but decided that he had to see it for himself before he woke anyone. Fawkes hovered in the air next to his bed; Harry threw on his Aurors’ robes over his pajamas, grabbed his wand, then Fawkes’s tail, and was gone.

## CHAPTER 21

### THE BATTLE

He was suddenly outside, several hundred feet in the air, looking at a stretch of countryside illuminated by a full moon over a cloudless night sky. Looks like Remus is going to miss this, Harry thought as he looked around and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Harry's Auror-acquired knowledge of England's geography had guided Fawkes to where Harry thought the Death Eaters might be, based on the attack route the Aurors expected. Figuring they probably weren't too far away, Harry emptied his mind and focused on detecting Dark magic. He had never tried to do it from so far away, but knew the 'signal' would be so strong that he had a chance of sensing it. Less than a half a minute later, he had it. Fawkes disappeared, and Harry was suddenly in a different place, higher in the air so he wouldn't be detected. He could see Death Eaters on brooms, and sense dementors, but he saw no giants. Activating the spell the Aurors taught him to identify objects hidden by magic, he suddenly saw fourteen giants, in two rows of seven, trailed by dozens of Death Eaters, Dark wizards, and/or Voldemort helpers.

Harry gave a start as, in an instant, Flora and Hermione were next to him, hovering in midair as he was; he realized that Flora knew through Fawkes what had happened, and had awoken Hermione. Without a word, Harry changed the hand holding Fawkes's tail from the right to the left, and put his arm around Hermione's shoulders, as she put her left arm around his waist.

He sent her an image of what he had just seen, then the information he had learned from Dumbledore. She sent him a feeling of confidence. We can do this, we'll be all right. He sent back the same feeling, to communicate that he agreed. He then sent her an image of him at Auror headquarters, telling them. She sent to him

that she intended to wake McGonagall, who would then activate the schoolwide alarm that would wake everyone.

Not having spoken a word, but having communicated a great deal, they both disappeared. Harry alerted the Aurors, then appeared back in his dormitory. “Everybody up!” he shouted. He yanked back the curtains of Ron’s bed to reveal a very sleepy Ron. Just then, the alarms went off, and Ron went from nearly asleep to awake in a second.

“What’s going on?” asked Ron.

“The castle’s under attack,” said Harry, speaking into his hand so Ginny could know at the same time. As the others scrambled to get dressed, Harry Summoned his broom and headed out of the dormitory.

Empty when he reached it, the common room quickly filled up, as people stumbled or ran from their dormitories. He stood in front of the portrait hole, silent until most of the students were there. Very conscious of the clock ticking, he didn’t wait for every last person to come out before speaking. Many looked alarmed, frightened, or bewildered.

“I’m speaking right now as your Head of House,” he announced. “The castle is under attack; the attacking forces should arrive at the castle in about a half an hour. Some of us will be going out to fight them in a minute. Sixth and seventh years who are seventeen or older can join if they want to; sixth years who aren’t seventeen can join if their parents haven’t forbidden it.”

He was about to continue when Dennis shouted, “Professor, I’d like to come too. I’m a good flier, and—”

“Yes, you are, and I’d love to have you,” Harry interrupted him, “but this is Professor McGonagall’s decision. Jennifer, Dave, you’re in charge here after I’ve gone. It’s very important that everyone follow their instructions. Soon after we’ve left, Fawkes and Flora will conduct an evacuation. You’re to go three at a time. The middle person, which should be the biggest person, should grab the phoenix’s tail, after the others have put their arms around his or her shoulders, like this.” Neville

and Hermione stepped to Harry's side and demonstrated. "You'll be taken to the Ministry, where you'll get more information, but probably not immediately. They'll be busy, too. The important thing is, you'll be safe.

"Those who are coming, follow me. We're meeting on the grounds, between the lake and the gate." Harry turned and exited the portrait hole, followed by, he suspected, most or all of the Gryffindor sixth and seventh years.

Harry met McGonagall, Snape, and Flitwick on his way out of the castle; each was carrying a broom. "Thank goodness for Albus," said Harry. "They could have been on us before we knew it. And you were definitely right about the time, Professor," he added to Snape, who had predicted a pre-dawn attack.

"One needs only to read a book on military tactics to make that prediction," responded Snape. "It is common sense."

"Why are they keeping the giants under a cloak?" asked Harry. "Why should they care if some Muggles see them?"

"The Dark Lord would be concerned that the Muggle military could get involved," said Snape. "There is not a high likelihood, but he would prefer to be careful. He has his own reasons for not wanting Muggles to know about the existence of wizards."

As had been the case when he had gone to observe the oncoming forces, the moon provided plenty of light. Looking around, Harry was struck by the natural beauty of the Hogwarts grounds, but he knew he couldn't linger on that thought.

As the last of the older students arrived, Harry started speaking, raising his voice so everyone could hear him. "I went out for a look before we woke everyone up. They should be about twenty minutes away by now, somewhere between ten or fifteen by the time we intercept them. Aurors will be joining us on the way, as well as some non-Aurors who've been fighting Voldemort since he came back." As he spoke, he knew that Arthur and Molly would be among them; he wasn't happy



about it, but knew they felt they had to, and that it would be hard for them to know that he, Ron, and Ginny would be going into danger. “The opposing forces consist of about eighty to a hundred Dark wizards, a hundred to a hundred and fifty dementors, and fourteen giants.”

He saw a few people flinch at that, and having seen one up close, he could certainly understand. “Do not get close to the giants, whatever you do. Remember, they are very hard to affect with magic. Leave them to the Aurors.

“Operate in groups of five or more, like we talked about in class. Make sure you have at least one person who can do a Patronus, but I know most of you can, so it should be no problem. You’ll be doing lots of Patronuses; at least one member of every group should have the specific responsibility of looking out for dementors. Not that you won’t know they’re coming, of course, I’ve told you all about their effects.”

“Harry, who’s with you?” asked Justin.

“Just Ron and Ginny,” he answered. “I need to be very maneuverable, and with their brooms, they can keep up with me. Okay, let’s—”

Hermione stepped forward and turned to address the group. “Harry apparently didn’t feel this was worth mentioning, but we just found out that he’s going to be a specific target, that they have a plan to make him more obvious to them somehow. If you see Harry, Ron, and Ginny in trouble, and you can help, you should do so. I think you all know that Harry has the ability now to defeat Voldemort, we can’t risk losing him.”

“Aurors will join his party before we reach the battle,” said McGonagall to Hermione. “Aurors on Firebolts,” she added to Harry. “But I second what Professor Granger said, in any case. Professor Potter and his party could be overwhelmed.”

“If we are, we’ll run,” he said, hoping to dissuade people from keeping their eyes on him; they would have enough to worry about. He didn’t want to openly

contradict McGonagall, however. “This is only if you happen to notice; don’t be looking for me.”

“I think they’ll notice by the huge group of Death Eaters chasing us,” said Ron; Harry couldn’t tell whether he was nervous or was being humorous.

“Let’s go,” said Harry, not wanting to lose any more time than he had to. Sixty students and ten professors mounted their brooms and flew off into the night.

Six minutes into the trip, Harry was starting to feel the effect of the cold. For winter, it was a relatively warm night, but being in the cold air for a long time was uncomfortable, as he knew from having done it when leaving Privet Drive two and a half years ago. Still, he knew that he would soon be so busy he wouldn’t notice the cold.

“Slow down,” Ginny admonished him, speaking into her hand. “I know you need to be in front because you know where we’re going, but we don’t want to get that far ahead of the group. You know what McGonagall said.”

“Yes, I know, that she doesn’t want me ahead of the group when we get there,” he said out loud, slowing down to be parallel to her. “You told me that after we took off.”

“Well, it looked like you needed to be reminded.”

“So, she told you to make sure I didn’t get too far ahead, and made sure our party was joined by Aurors. Anything else she hasn’t told me?”

“You’ll be told when you need to know,” she said; he wasn’t sure whether or not she was joking.

“Glad to hear it. Just don’t try to stop me from doing anything I want to do.”

“You can fly right up to a giant and poke it in the eye, for all I care, just as long as you understand that we’re going with you.”

Harry remembered her saying that she wanted him to consider any risk to him as if it were a risk to her. He winced in discomfort at the thought of it, but he knew he couldn't think about that then; he had to do what he thought was best. On his other side, Ron asked, "So, Harry, are you on board with this whole giant-eye-poking thing? Because if you wanted to skip it, that'd be okay with me."

Grim as his last thought had been, Harry couldn't help but chuckle. "We'll see how it goes."

"Speaking of their eyes," continued Ron, now serious, "are the Aurors going to be using the Conjunctivitis Curse? When Hagrid told us that story—"

"No, they don't plan to," Harry interrupted Ron, anticipating the rest of the sentence. "Kingsley said that they expect the Death Eaters will have put some protection spell on the giants' eyes, that they'd anticipate that spell. They'll try it once just to be sure, but they don't expect it to be effective. The Death Eaters and dementors will be a big problem, but dealing with the giants will be the important thing."

"When do you expect them to set up the artifact?" asked Ron.

"Probably not until the giants have reached the Hogwarts grounds, or are very close to it," said Harry. "The giants won't be affected by Hogwarts' magical defenses, so the main reason for turning it on then would be so we couldn't fight the giants once they got past the castle walls. Well, nobody but us six, Luna, and Winston. And that wouldn't be nearly enough against fourteen giants. And if the giants get inside the grounds, they can let Death Eaters in, block anyone else, then withdraw the artifact, and they have the castle. Like I said, the giants are the key."

Harry turned his head every minute or so to make sure the others were still behind him, which they always were. Very soon, he saw several dozen wizards on brooms intercept them from their right; Harry could easily see that they were the Aurors, along with Order members. Looking through the crowd of brooms, he could see Arthur, Molly, and the rest of the Weasleys, and worried again. They're

probably worried about Ron, Ginny, and I, he thought, but we're better able to protect ourselves.

Kingsley maneuvered into the Hogwarts crowd to fly next to McGonagall, as Tonks and Dawlish moved to join Harry's group. He wasn't surprised to see Tonks, but was to see Dawlish, who usually didn't have much to do with him. I'm really getting high-powered protection, he thought, knowing that Dawlish was perhaps the most powerful Auror. Catching Harry's surprised look, Dawlish gave Harry a wry glance. "I just want to be here when some new spells get invented."

"There they are," said Ron.

Harry looked ahead and saw the giants, a few hundred yards in the distance; it reminded him of something he'd wondered briefly when he'd first seen them. "Dawlish, why don't the giants have any weapons?"

"Probably because the giants themselves are pretty good weapons, and Voldemort wouldn't trust them not to get carried away with extra weapons and use them on whoever was nearest," explained Dawlish, looking intently at the giants. "We can always fly above them anyway, no matter what weapons they have, and we could use Repulsion Charms if they gave them projectile weapons. No, they're just going to dare us to try to stop the giants, and if we can't, they just march to the castle."

"That's not going to happen," muttered Harry.

"See, they can see us, that's for sure," said Dawlish. "They're not doing anything different, except they've taken off the cloak you said was on them. They're waiting for us to make the first move. They're not going to break their formation unless we can show that we can hurt the giants."

Here we go, thought Harry. He slowed down and descended to twenty-five feet, roughly eye level to a giant. The giants were at about one hundred yards and closing... seventy... fifty... thirty...

At what he guessed was twenty yards away, Harry pointed his wand at the nearest giant, and focused on creating a blinding light. A narrow, powerful beam of

light came out of his wand. It was far stronger than anything he had done in practice, so strong that he had to squint, and he saw that others around him did as well. The giant was knocked back, as if by a physical force. He roared in anger, then charged forward; the other giants immediately did so as well.

“Harry, up!” shouted Ginny. Deciding to get one more shot in, Harry pointed at the next closest one and fired again. This one was knocked back as well, but the other ones were very close. Harry quickly turned and shot upwards, the others in his group with him. The nearest giant’s swing missed Ron by less than a second as he followed Harry away. “Don’t cut it that fine anymore!” Ginny shouted at him. “Remember, you’re not the only one that can get hurt because of it!” He nodded, silently promising to be more careful, or at least to not take chances like that unless it was truly important.

“Avada Kedavra!” shouted a chorus of voices. Turning, Harry was surprised to see that it wasn’t Death Eaters shouting it, but Aurors. A hail of green bolts sailed downward and hit their target. The giant staggered back, barely staying on her feet. Harry contributed a Stunning Spell, which seemed to have a small effect of its own.

Suddenly, the night became much colder, and Harry started to feel disoriented. Knowing immediately what it was, he summoned the memory of Ginny’s reaction when he first told her he loved her, and a brilliant white stag came out of his wand. It was one of many, and the dementors started retreating, but they had accomplished their purpose: they had distracted the Aurors from their attack on the giant. A few dozen Dark wizards flew up to harass the Aurors further, firing spells at them while maneuvering around on brooms, trying to deny the Aurors clear targets. Other Dark wizards followed the dementors in attacking the Hogwarts group. Twenty feet to his left, Harry saw a group of students recoil from an area-effect spell. Deciding that the students needed more help than the Aurors, he sped in their direction, firing off Stunning Spells as he went. One connected, and the opponent fell off of his broom. It reminded Harry of the problem of fighting at

that height: they were out of reach of the giants, but being knocked off of one's broom was possibly deadly. The fall could kill, and unencumbered Death Eaters could easily finish off anyone on the ground. Harry knew that part of the Order members' jobs was to catch people who fell, Summon their brooms and wands, and get them to safety. He also knew that while their side had a technical numerical superiority, some of their manpower was being used for such defensive purposes as that and warding off the dementors. In terms of sheer offensive capacity, they were outnumbered.

As Harry flew closer, he decided that Imperius Charms were the way to go, if possible. He tried one on an enemy who was ten yards away, but it didn't work; he then had to focus on defensive spells as he became a target, then dementors attacked again. Harry conjured another Patronus, and realized that he should get in the habit of doing it every fifteen seconds or so, as a routine defensive measure.

Another look around told him that the giants were moving on ahead, but they were now running. It was a slow run, more like a jog, but because of the giants' size, they covered ground very quickly. He knew this was one possible strategy the Death Eaters might employ in such a situation: if the giants could fight anything in range, they would, and if not, they would proceed to the castle. It made sense. Harry quickly debated whether to stay and help the students, or to go chase the giants. Almost immediately, he got an impression from Hermione. Go after the giants, she communicated. Neville and I will take over here, let people know when it's time to retreat.

Shooting off a few more Stunning Spells, Harry turned and flew towards the giants; it would take him less than a minute to catch up to them. Looking at his hand, he said, "Tell the others, be ready to ascend quickly." He heard her relay his instructions as he neared the giant who was lagging behind. Ron and Tonks conjured Patronuses as Dawlish shot off spells at the nearest Death Eater. Harry hoped it wouldn't distract the giant, but it didn't seem to.

How close dared he get? He had just seen the Imperius Charm fail with a wizard from a range of ten yards, and these were giants, resistant to magic. He had to get close enough that he could be swatted away if he were discovered; there was just no choice. He looked into his hand. "I have to get close, but you don't have to. Just be ready to distract him if he notices I'm there."

He flew closer, until he was four feet from the giant's back. Deciding that was close enough, he pointed his wand and focused on infusing the giant with love. The giant continued running, oblivious. Harry continued to concentrate, thinking about nothing else, trusting the others to warn him of any danger. He had been doing it for about twenty seconds when he heard Ginny in his head, shouting a warning. One of the other giants, the one nearest the one Harry was trying to affect, had seen their party; she shouted at the other one, and swerved to try to bat Harry away. Harry turned his broom so that it pointed to what had been his left, and shot away, barely escaping the giants' outstretched hands.

He ascended to a safe height, swearing in frustration. Facing the others, he said, "Okay, I want to get out in front of them, do the light thing again. Maybe I can slow them down."

"You know that Death Eaters are fighting Aurors over there, right?" asked Dawlish.

"I know. Maybe I can sneak up behind a few Death Eaters with the Imperius Charm. Let's go."

They flew off above the giants, who were still running at a steady pace. As they were past half of them, Harry looked behind him and, squinting in anticipation, did the flashlight spell on the trailing giant. The giant shouted in pain and fell, hands over his eyes.

One problem with the spell, Harry now realized, was that it was very visually obvious; everyone on the entire battlefield would know it was happening, and therefore know where he was. So much for sneaking up behind a few Death Eaters and doing Imperius Charms, he thought. Still, the giants were the first

priority. Or, should he focus on the Death Eaters nearest the giants, hoping he could help get rid of enough of them so that they could fight the giants unimpeded?

His thoughts were interrupted by more dementors swarming around them, obviously attracted by the light. Death Eaters soon followed, having disengaged from the Aurors. They closed around Harry and his group. Harry warded off spells as best he could, and he saw a Killing Curse shield go up around Ginny. The Aurors reached them, causing the Death Eaters to retreat, and one to fall off his broom. Looking ahead, Harry saw that the giants were now a few hundred yards closer to Hogwarts than they had been when he knocked down the other one, who was just now getting up.

“Harry! Cover us!” shouted Kingsley. Harry looked around, shooting off Stunning Spells at anything that got close.

“Avada Kedavra!” shouted thirty voices, and Harry now understood why they were asking him to cover them: they wanted to finish off the one that was down. Death Eaters attacked the Aurors; they got close enough that Harry was able to do the Imperius Charm on one, who screamed and fell off his broom. Harry focused on another, who turned and put an area-effect spell on his comrades. So, they’re not all Death Eaters, thought Harry, since this one hasn’t been Cleansed.

The other Dark wizards recoiled, and three shot Killing Curses at him. Acting reflexively, Harry put up his Killing Curse shield around the wizard. Harry knew the Aurors might prefer that he let the wizard be killed, but he was doing a good job of distracting his comrades.

Harry shot off more Stunning Spells, then gasped as he saw Ron get hit, and fall off his broom while the Aurors tried to finish off the giant on the ground. Harry and Ginny dove; Harry caught him fifteen feet above the ground. Thank God there aren’t any giants right here, he thought. Ginny Summoned Ron’s Firebolt as Harry Summoned Ron’s wand, which he had dropped.



“Give me his broom!” Harry shouted to Ginny, who tossed it to him. Harry caught it in his free hand, straining under Ron’s weight as he held onto Ron with his other arm. He Disapparated, appearing in the emergency room of St. Mungo’s. He put the wand in Ron’s hand and the broom across his stomach so that Ron could return to the battle if he felt well enough to. He thought he saw Ron’s eyes flicker, but he couldn’t wait around for Ron to regain consciousness. I think he’s okay, Harry told himself. He has to be okay. Harry refused to entertain the alternative.

He Disapparated again, finding himself on the ground slightly away from the battle area. Mounting his broom and taking off, he asked Ginny on his hand where she was, then shot ahead in pursuit.

It took him less than a minute to catch up. They were with the Aurors, and the group of students and Order members had made their way back from the site of the first engagement. The scene was chaotic, as Harry had been told battles usually were. Some Order members were constantly creating Patronuses, and some were attacking Dark wizards in groups of ten. As he flew through it, Harry shot off Stunning Spells at the Dark wizards nearest to him, then remembered what he should be doing, and put the Imperius Charm on the next few he passed. He realized that the Imperius Charm was better for more than one reason: the Stunning Spell could miss, whereas the Imperius Charm worked differently, and always reached the person who it was aimed at, if they were in range.

As soon as he got in front of another giant, still at a safe height, he directed the flashlight spell at the giant’s eyes; again, this giant shouted in pain and stumbled, but didn’t go down. Harry swooped down into the danger area—as he thought of it, any altitude below forty feet was a risk if giants were anywhere nearby—and maneuvered for a clear shot at the giant’s eyes. He finally found one, and used the spell again; the giant went down.

Aurors, who had come over when they had seen the light the first time, started firing off Killing Curses; Harry flew back toward them to protect them from the Dark wizards he knew would be harassing them. Two down, twelve to go,

he thought, but there's no way we can get enough of them by the time they reach the school. He knew the evacuation would be complete, but Death Eaters couldn't be allowed to occupy the castle, because it would be very hard to take it back once they had it, and resumed its magical defenses.

He flew ahead again, pushing the limits of the Firebolt's speed. As he caught up to the giants again, he could see Hogwarts in the distance, and despaired. It's going to be too late, he thought. He zoomed ahead of the pack of giants, this time using his flashlight spell on the lead giant, hoping others would trip over her as she went down. She did go down, but the others managed not to stumble over her. As he tried to get in position to do it to another one, Ron flew in and rejoined the group. Harry wanted to ask Ron if he was sure he was all right, but knew he couldn't take the time.

As the Aurors rushed over to take advantage of the next one down, Death Eaters followed them, and others joined from having been engaging the Hogwarts students; clearly protecting the giants was considered the top priority. The situation was even more chaotic than it had been: Patronuses of all sizes and shapes were flying about, pushing aside dementors; spells were flying through the air, and brooms were moving constantly as wizards on both sides tried to avoid being hit by enemy spells. It was impossible to focus on what was happening enough to understand the whole picture, so Harry just concentrated on what he wanted to do.

Getting to the clearest spot he could while still in visual range of a giant, Harry flew toward the one that was furthest away from the others. He shone the light in the giant's eyes; the giant stumbled and shielded his eyes. Again, Harry flew down to get a better shot to put the giant on the ground. Because the giant was shielding his eyes, it was difficult, but he finally got the position, and used the spell again. The giant screamed and went down; Harry was surprised that he wasn't being harassed by Dark wizards, but guessed that the others in his party were helping him with that.

He turned around on his broom to gain altitude again, and had almost reached forty feet when he heard a loud shriek. It wasn't the first one he'd heard since the battle had started, but it was the one that had happened nearest him, and he was sure he recognized the voice. Dread taking him over, he quickly turned to see Ginny flying through the air, and another giant at the end of his follow-through. He clearly hadn't gotten away fast enough, and Ginny had been behind him, covering him along with the others.

Terrified that Ginny would hit the ground and be stepped on, Harry instantly cast his spell on the giant, this time focusing on keeping it there even after the giant reacted. He stopped only because he realized that Ginny would soon hit the ground, and be injured more even if she wasn't stepped on. As he turned to levitate her, he saw Ron already doing so. She was hovering, no longer screaming but in obvious pain, one leg bent forward at the knee in such an obviously unnatural way that Harry winced. He flew to her, grabbed her around the shoulders as gently as he could, came to a full stop as Ron handed him her broom and wand, and Disapparated.

Again he appeared in the St. Mungo's emergency room, which was busier than it had been just a few minutes ago when he had taken Ron there. He started to lay Ginny on the nearest empty bed, but she was levitated out of his grasp by a Healer.

"How bad is it?" asked Harry immediately, not realizing or caring that the Healer had laid eyes on Ginny just that moment. Obviously accustomed to frantic relatives, the Healer ignored him and concentrated on Ginny, waving his wand and clearly lessening Ginny's pain.

"Go back, Harry," she said, still in some pain. "They have me, I'll be okay."

"I need to know—"

"Go back, dammit!" she shouted. "They need you! I'll be fine, it only got me below the waist. Go!"

His chest tightening, tears threatening, he bent over and kissed her, quickly and urgently. Then he Disapparated, finding himself not too far from the battle, which was moving ever closer to Hogwarts. They can't be more than two or three minutes away, he thought. He kicked off the ground again, flying as fast as the Firebolt would go toward the battle, and to the castle.

As he neared the site of the battle, he saw something that chilled him: two Aurors were flying low, at about twenty feet, one from left to right and the other from right to left in front of the giants. It was obvious to Harry that this was a desperate tactic to try to delay the giants' advance onto the Hogwarts grounds, that they were hoping to lure the giants into chasing them instead of continuing forward. It was working; three giants were chasing each one, leaving only four giants continuing to Hogwarts.

Praying that the Aurors knew what they were doing, Harry continued ahead to where the four giants were heading. He knew there was no time to stop all four of them, and he was sure the other six wouldn't be distracted for long. Seeing the Hogwarts gate in the distance, he had a sudden idea. He zoomed past the four giants; as he passed, he saw Dawlish, Ron, and Tonks peel off to join him. All that time they let it sit there, thought Harry. I hope they never did move it.

Passing the edge of the battle, he looked to his left, and seeing yet another thing that threatened to stop his heart, did a double-take. Thirty meters away were a very familiar, and very small, group of people on brooms: the Slytherin second years. They were on the periphery of the battle; he saw them flying in two formations of five, and Killing Curse shields nearby. He wanted to turn and fly to them, scream at them to leave the battle, but again, he knew he couldn't spare the time. He flew on, his heart pounding in his chest. What are they doing here? he wondered. How did they get out here in the first place? They were supposed to have been evacuated, and I can't imagine all ten of them could sneak out past the Slytherin prefects. If they did, those prefects are going to hear about it from me.

He tried to stop thinking about it, but he couldn't; as he flew, he got more and more emotional. I can't cry in the middle of a battle, he thought, feeling it was ridiculous to even have to think about it. But that was what he wanted to do just then. He reflected that going into battle was bad enough, but it was worse when virtually everyone you cared about in the world was out there with you, taking the same risks.

Unable to cry, he felt anger rising up. At the Death Eaters, at Voldemort, at the giants, even at the second years for doing something so irresponsible and risky. This has to stop, he thought, we have to end this thing. Is it still there... yes, it is, it must be under that tent, that covering, whatever. I guess they didn't want it to rust.

Twenty yards outside the Hogwarts gate, with his wand Harry flung aside the tent to reveal the upside-down tank that, for some reason, had remained there since September. He lifted the tank until it was levitating next to him, then, concentrating on holding onto it, headed toward the battle just as Dawlish, Ron, and Tonks caught up with him. As he got closer to the battle, on his left he saw Hagrid and Grawp, both armed with long weapons with points at both ends, waiting. The last line of defense, he thought. Let's hope it doesn't come to that.

It took him less than half a minute to reach the nearest giant. The giant didn't see him approaching from the side until Harry was within ten yards of him. The giant turned his head. Concentrating for all he was worth, pouring his emotions into what he was doing, Harry swung the tank around and smashed the giant in the head with it. As the tank made contact, Harry felt a terrible headache come on, but one like he had never felt before. He immediately knew what it was: a warning that he was doing something he shouldn't be doing, something that went against the energy of love. He didn't know whether the tank had killed the giant, but he knew it possibly could. He winced in pain, but held onto the tank and looked for another giant. I have to stop them, he thought, them taking the castle is unacceptable. I can stop them.

Another giant ran past, seemingly oblivious to what had happened to the last one. Harry wound up for another swing, and hit the next giant in the back of the head, sending her sprawling forward. Harry screamed in pain as another headache came on, this one worse. He dropped the tank, not because he wanted to, but because he couldn't hold onto it. He slumped forward on his broom, unable to think about or do anything. The next thing he knew he was being guided up. He looked up to see Dawlish, an arm around his side, taking him up and out of range of other giants.

He received an intense impression from Hermione. Stop it, her feelings pleaded with him. Stop doing that, you'll lose the ability to use the energy of love. We need that, you need it. We'll find some other way, but stop using the tank. It's hurting you, you have to stop.

He gasped for breath, and reached up and patted Dawlish on the arm to indicate that he was all right; Dawlish removed his arm. Fawkes suddenly appeared above him and started to sing; Harry wondered whether he was finished with the evacuation, or if he just knew that Harry needed his support. He felt the song lift his mood, as it always did. I have to find some other way, he thought, echoing Hermione's thoughts. He realized he was using the tank in anger, and the anger was probably what was hurting him as much as the possibility that he might kill a giant.

He looked for the tank, but before he saw it, he was suddenly hit by something physical. He looked down and, to his great surprise, saw something that looked like water on his robes. A crowd of Aurors was starting to form around him, and they fought and chased off the wizards who had hit Harry with the water, for what purpose he couldn't imagine. He resumed looking for the tank, and he saw a giant looking like he was about to pick it up. Just before the giant bent over, Harry hit him with the flashlight spell, and the giant went down. Good, thought Harry, no reduction in strength, I must have stopped in time. Knowing he couldn't leave the tank there for another giant to pick up and throw at Aurors or students, he levitated it, and heaved it off into the distance, as far as he could throw it. To his

astonishment, it sailed high and far into the air; it had to be a hundred yards, he thought. It landed with a crash right in front of the entrance to the Quidditch pitch.

He saw Ron, Tonks, and Dawlish looking at him in astonishment, and thought to make a comment about how far he'd thrown the tank, but realized that wasn't what they were astonished about. Looking at his torso, where they were looking, he saw a bright light, which seemed to be getting brighter and brighter. Oh, great, he thought, this is what Albus was warning me about—the idea they had about illuminating me. I didn't know he meant it so literally. He would be a beacon, an easily identifiable target, no matter where he flew. This is going to be fun, he thought sardonically.

Sure enough, dozens of Dark wizards started converging on his position. He took off, flying away from Hogwarts and the battle, Ron, Dawlish, and Tonks right behind him, and fifty Dark wizards trailing them. He felt his hand tingle. “Harry, I just want you to know I'm okay, they tell me I'm going to be all right. It's not good, but it's nothing they can't fix. I'm just not going to be able to rejoin the battle, to put it mildly.”

He looked at his hand. “That's the best news I've heard all night. Both that you'll be all right, and that you won't be able to rejoin the battle.”

He could hear the smile in her voice. “You would say that.”

“Yes, I would,” he agreed. Looking behind him, he saw Dawlish, Ron, and Tonks right behind him, matching his speed, and protecting themselves and him against any spells done by their pursuers that seemed likely to hit. Twenty seconds later, he realized with surprise that they weren't outdistancing the Dark wizards. Not all of the initial pursuers were still with him, but at least thirty were. Did they all get Firebolts? he wondered. He had thought he could simply outrun them, but clearly he was going to have to think of something else.

Since he couldn't lose them, he decided that going away from the battle was the wrong direction. He started turning slowly, as a sudden turn would allow them to gain on him too much. As it was, they gained about five yards over the course of

the turn. His next idea was to take them all the way to Hogwarts, on the grounds. He would fly low, and if the Four Corners artifact had been deployed, he would fall off his broom, but so would his pursuers. He would have working magic and they wouldn't, so he and Ron could take care of them easily. And if the artifact hasn't been deployed... well, I'll think of something else, I guess, he thought. He knew he would pick up more pursuers, but nobody could catch him, and those without Firebolts would quickly fall behind.

Approaching the battle site again, he decided to see if he could get in a flashlight shot at a giant without slowing down. The giants had made relatively little progress in the last minute; their protection had diminished when the Dark wizards had started following Harry, and more Auror Killing Curses were hitting them, causing them to stumble and try to evade the Aurors. One giant happened to be looking away from the battle, in Harry's direction, and Harry immediately took the opportunity. Descending a bit to get a better shot, his aim was again good, and the giant stumbled to one knee. Harry pulled up on his Firebolt for a quick ascent, barely out of the reach of a giant who jumped, arms extended, in hopes of swatting him. Didn't know they could jump, he thought.

Safely out of range of the giants, he descended again quickly, his comrades staying with him with no difficulty. He flew just over the walls of the castle grounds, being careful to avoid the lake and the Whomping Willow. He braced himself for a fall, but almost to his disappointment, it didn't happen. He sailed across the grounds at an altitude of four feet, followed now by forty Dark wizards. Looking over his left shoulder, he saw another ten off to his left, apparently anticipating a turn. Better turn right, he decided. Ascending again, he started the turn just before he would have left the Hogwarts grounds on the other side, in the direction of the Forbidden Forest. Looking over his shoulder again, he thought he saw a dozen small objects fall from the pursuing Dark wizards. He thought he must have imagined it, but that he should be sure; he decided to ask Filch to check the grounds after the battle. Then again, he thought wryly, I'd better do it myself. Harry



knew Filch loathed taking instructions from him, which Filch was bound to do, as Harry was a professor and Head of House. If I ever do become headmaster, he thought, Filch is gone. There must be someone who's a nice person who would want the job.

Wondering momentarily why he was having such strange, random thoughts in the middle of a situation that seemed to demand his complete concentration, he focused again on the battle. How am I going to lose these people? It's like I'm wearing a huge, neon sign. He again sped past the battle; the giants were approaching the Hogwarts walls, which Harry knew wouldn't stop them. He imagined that the artifact was now being deployed. Great timing, he thought, but didn't want to turn around again. If the giants broke through, even he and the others who could use magic despite the artifact couldn't do much to stop them.

His hand tingled again. "I know you can't talk, I just want to say, I love you."

He smiled, and held up his hand. "I love you, too. Just running away, as fast as I can. Doesn't require much concentration."

"What's going on?" she asked.

"They got some stuff on me that makes me a huge, bright target. I'm being chased by thirty Death Eaters who must be on Firebolts. I can't lose them, but at least I'm taking them away from the battle."

To his great surprise, she said confidently, "That's okay, no problem. I know what to do. Just do what I say, okay?"

"Since I have no ideas right now, I'll be happy to. What is it?"

"First, start going up. I mean, straight up. Hold on tight to the broom. If you need to, use both hands, and don't talk, just listen."

Harry's eyebrows went high, but he started pulling the broomstick up, gradually so Ron and the others could follow. "Yes, I see that look," she said. "Just do what I say."

“I am,” he assured her, looking at his left hand while gripping the broom tightly with his right, which was difficult since it also held his wand. He wasn’t worried, because he knew Fawkes would catch him if he fell. “Going straight up now. Feels strange, but kind of neat.”

“Are they following?” she asked. “Tightly packed?”

He looked down, past Ron, Dawlish, and Tonks, who he imagined must have been wondering what he was doing. “Yes, they’re all following, in a pretty tight group.”

“Good. Now, use the Imperius Charm, as an area-effect spell.”

He shook his head quickly in surprise, thinking he must not have heard her correctly. “What?”

“Harry,” she said urgently, “I just got a visit from Blaise here. He said it’s a message from Albus, that you should do this. It’ll work, just do it.”

He didn’t have to be told twice. Grasping the broom with his left hand, he pointed his wand straight down, and looked down. “Scatter!” he shouted to his party. They flew off in different directions, and he visualized the Imperius Charm as affecting a wide area, and cast it.

A field of silvery light emanated from his wand, expanding in the shape of a cone, with his wand as the tip. As it enveloped the crowd of pursuers, he heard screams, and saw many of them fall off their brooms. A dozen remained, which meant that they were allied with Voldemort, but not Death Eaters. It occurred to Harry that they were so far up in the air that those who fell would certainly die, unless someone was waiting to catch them. That thought made him wonder where Voldemort was; there had been no evidence at all of his participation in any of what had happened.

He saw Dawlish fly straight down; he wondered if it was to check to see if they would in fact be caught or not. Turning, he flew toward Ron, and exchanged a smile with him. He looked at his left hand and said, “It worked. Thanks, and tell Blaise to thank Albus for me.”

“I will, but you know he hears you anyway. Now, go finish off the giants. It’ll work on them, too. You don’t need to get that close, just do it from fifty feet.”

“That’s great,” he said enthusiastically, as he took the Firebolt to full speed again, Ron right behind him, Tonks and Dawlish further back, escorting the dozen surviving Dark wizards, still under the influence of the Imperius Charm. “But why didn’t he tell me this before? It would have saved a lot of time, not to mention, some lives.”

He thought he heard sadness in her voice; it must have been her sorrow at being reminded that lives had no doubt been lost. “You know he tries to avoid telling you stuff like this, that he does it only when he thinks it’s absolutely necessary. The way they were chasing you, he must have felt like there was no choice.”

He nodded. “Well, I shouldn’t complain, just be happy that he told me when he did. I’m sure it’ll end up saving a lot of lives, not just mine. I’m going to sign off, I’ll let you know when it’s over.”

“Okay,” she said. “Do you mind if I keep looking? There’s not that much to do here.”

He smiled. “Go ahead. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she said, then went silent.

Flying next to him, Ron shook his head in wonder. “Pulled another one out of your hat, I see.”

“Albus did, really,” he corrected Ron. “He says it’ll work on the giants, too. I’m not counting my chickens, though, until this is done.”

Ron frowned. “Counting what chickens?”

“I’ll explain later.”

A few seconds later, they reached the scene of the current battle with the greatest concentration of Dark wizards. Harry cast the area-effect Imperius Charm; only one wizard screamed and fell off his broom, as the rest suddenly went docile. Harry mentally instructed them to throw down their wands, and fly over the lake

and jump in, which they obligingly did. Moving on to another, smaller battle, he did the same thing, with the same results. He turned his attention to the remaining nine giants, who were within the Hogwarts walls, and advancing on the castle. One was holding the Whomping Willow, which he had clearly pulled out by the roots. He must have intended to use it as a weapon, but it was thrashing him violently.

Harry flew over and cast the Charm over the one nearest Hagrid and Grawp, who were just about to start fighting. The giant didn't seem affected for a second, then lost its aggressive posture, and just stood there. Harry moved on to the next one, and again it took a few seconds. The as-yet-unaffected giants shoved the affected ones in confusion; the Charmed ones did nothing in response. Within a minute, all nine giants were wandering aimlessly around the Hogwarts grounds, except for the one who was on the ground, curled up in a defensive posture and covering his face, being beaten by the Whomping Willow he had uprooted.

Just out of curiosity, Harry cast the new spell on the Willow. It had no effect.

The dementors had started retreating when Harry used his new spell for the first time near the castle; Harry wondered if somehow they knew that meant the tide of the battle had turned. He wanted to head back out to the path that had led to Hogwarts and find out if there were still any Dark wizards flying around, but he didn't, for fear that it was mainly his proximity that was keeping the giants under the Imperius Charm. In any case, he was sure that the Aurors and the others would easily take care of any Dark wizards that remained; he figured they would probably have escaped the battle anyway, knowing it was hopeless.

Harry mentally instructed the giants to leave the Hogwarts grounds, but it didn't work. He wondered if this was part of the giants' general resistance to magic; it took an area-effect spell to work on one of them, and all it did was mollify them. Still, he wasn't complaining. Hagrid and Grawp came over and started guiding the giants away from the castle, Harry staying close just in case. Ron was with Harry, his

most recent action having been pulling—magically, of course—the Whomping Willow off of the giant it was attacking. Harry imagined they would re-plant it, though he couldn't see the use for it, except that it sort of added to Hogwarts' character.

Pansy, Hermione, and Neville flew over and landed near them; Harry and Ron got hugs from Hermione and Pansy. Harry added a quiet “thank you” to Hermione when she hugged him; she just nodded. People from the Ministry started Apparating in, including a few with cauldrons full of a red liquid. Harry found Kingsley, who explained that the liquid was something that would pacify even giants for a long period of time, at least a day. To Harry's surprise, the giants picked up the cauldrons and drank the contents, with a little encouragement from Grawp. I guess it must work with giants, just not in the same way, he thought. It must make them more suggestible.

“There's no reason we can't go to St. Mungo's, is there?” Harry asked Kingsley as the last of the giants drank the potion.

“No, go ahead, things here seem to be under control. You five can Apparate freely until further notice.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, and all five were suddenly in the St. Mungo's emergency room. They saw Ginny in a bed in a corner of the large room, and quickly headed over.

There was a chair near the bed; Harry took it. He held Ginny's hand, kissed it, and looked at her with vast relief and love. “We're so glad you're all right,” said Neville.

“Me, too,” she said wryly. “That was close, I was lucky. And I'm glad that the Joining of Hands came in handy for something other than Quidditch.”

Harry chuckled, and explained to the others what had happened. “But I'm surprised that Albus didn't just tell me himself, through Fawkes. It wouldn't have been a difficult message to send.”

“He sent one through Blaise before,” pointed out Ron. “He could've sent you that one himself, too. He must have had his reasons.”

“Well,” started Ginny, sighing a little, “I have a little confession to make. When I said I got the message from Blaise, it... sort of, wasn’t quite true.”

Harry’s face expressed his puzzlement. “What do you mean? You got it from someone else? From Albus himself somehow?” Ginny shook her head. “In what way was it ‘not quite true,’ then?” he asked.

“In the way that it was a complete lie,” she clarified, with some embarrassment and a hint of amusement. “I never got any message.”

Hermione and Pansy smiled, but Harry was totally befuddled. “I don’t understand,” he said blankly.

“I had this idea a few weeks ago,” she explained. “I was remembering how you changed the fire-suppression spell to make it an area-effect spell, and somehow I had the thought that in a battle, it would be really good if you could do the same for the Imperius Charm. I got the idea during one of the combat flying lessons. Then I remembered how it usually works with you, how you get them when you really need them. I thought maybe the way it works is that they work because you need them to work, you believe that they’ll work. The flashlight spell worked much better now than in practice, because you needed it to, it was the real situation.

“I thought about telling you about my idea, but it realized it might not do any good—you might decide that it was impossible, then you wouldn’t be able to do it when you needed to. I decided to wait, to only suggest it if the situation was that you desperately needed it, like the fire-suppression spell. Since I would be with you, I’d know the right time. My getting hurt changed that, but in a way, it made it better. You had only ever come up with the spells by yourself, you’d never had them suggested to you, so I thought it might not work. But because I wasn’t with you, I could tell you it came from Albus. You’d believe me, and because it came from him, you’d be sure you could do it. And you were, and you did.”

There was silence for a few seconds as everyone digested what Ginny had said. Finally Ron said, “Wow. And I thought I was devious.”

“I hope this makes it into a history textbook someday,” added Hermione. “He created the area-effect Imperius Charm under false pretenses.”

With a sly grin at Harry, Pansy said, “He looks like he needs it explained again.”

“I don’t know whether to be annoyed that you lied,” Harry finally said, “or to thank you for saving some lives, probably including mine.”

“I know which one I’d pick,” said Neville.

Harry nodded. “I guess I shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Or is that not a wizarding phrase?” he asked, turning to Hermione.

“They say it about dragons,” she said, “but it has a different meaning. With dragons, it’s because they could burn you to a crisp.”

“Who would want a dragon as a gift anyway,” wondered Ron. “Well, besides Hagrid, that is.”

“I can’t believe you did that,” said Harry, still amazed. “You’re really something.”

He stood, and leaned over her bed to kiss her; she put her arms around his neck and held him there to prolong the kiss. Finally letting go, she smiled at him as he resumed his seat. “Remember, I’m fine from the waist up.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he assured her. Turning to Hermione, he said, “And thank you, for helping me when I was going a little out of my head.”

She explained to the others what she had done, then said to him, “Fawkes was sending, I could feel what you felt—both the emotion, and the pain, though not as strongly, of course. I was really afraid for you, which you probably got from what I sent you. I can understand why you got so upset, especially seeing the second years out there. I would’ve been too, if I were you. They’re all okay, by the way, I saw them after the battle ended.”

“Thank God,” he said fervently. “I couldn’t believe it when I saw them. How did they get out, anyway? The Slytherin prefects can’t be that incompetent.”

Hermione started to answer. “I don’t know, but...”

She trailed off, as she started receiving the same information that Harry was. Their mouths hung open, to the surprise of the others. Emotion rose up in Harry yet again. “Fawkes?” he gasped. “Why would he do that?”

Hermione explained to the others. “Fawkes took them to the battle. During the evacuation, they asked him to take them there instead of the Ministry. He did.” The others were now stunned, but not as much as Harry.

“I can’t believe it,” he said quietly. He felt like he should be angry, but he was too surprised to be angry. “Why... he would have known the pain that would cause me, he would feel it himself, and he would know that when he did it. Why?”

“I think I know, Harry,” said Hermione somberly. “The answer is, for the same reason he helped you in the Chamber of Secrets. Fawkes responds to loyalty, loyalty to the person he’s bonded to. The second years wanted to go because they wanted to help you. Fawkes knew that, and that would dictate what he did. He’ll do anything he can to help someone who wants to help you, even if it isn’t what you would want.”

It was hard for Harry to accept, but he knew intuitively that it was true. Finally he sighed deeply, and said, “There’s something very ironic about that.”

“I’d say that’s true,” agreed Hermione. “He’ll do what’s best for you in one way, even if it’s not the best in another. We all face situations like that, though, where both choices have their good and bad points. Phoenixes will just decide in favor of loyalty.”

“At least they’re okay,” he said. “I don’t know what I would have done if any of them had died. Speaking of which... I really hate to ask this, but does anyone know...”

“I do,” said Ginny sadly. “Everyone, wounded or dead, has come through here, and I’ve been keeping my eyes and ears open. Six of the Order members and the people helping them died, I don’t think we knew any of them. One Auror, I didn’t catch the name. And four students. Two sixth years, Wilma and Everett. And two seventh years, Jonathan and Ernie.”



Harry closed his eyes. He had known all of them, of course, but Ernie most of all; Harry considered him a friend, if not a close friend. He looked up at Hermione, pain in his eyes, remembering what she had said after last year's Hogsmeade attack. "So, do you think we got off easy with four?"

"It's never easy, but of course I know what you mean," she said. "I think about sixty of us went out, so yes, four isn't that high a number, considering the kind of danger there was. We weren't an army, just a bunch of people doing their best, with no coordinated strategy. We did pretty well."

They sat in silence for a minute, contemplating their losses. Then Ginny asked, "What happened to the Death Eaters that were following you straight up into the air?"

Harry shrugged, so Ron answered. "The ones that fell, died. Dawlish checked and made sure. He thinks we were several hundred feet up by that time, like about a fifty-story building. No one's going to survive that. And unlike our people who fell, like me, there was no one to catch them."

"That reminds me, what about Voldemort?" asked Ginny. "Did he ever show up?"

Ron answered again. "Dawlish said that at about the middle of the battle, the relays showed that he did, but he was obviously Disillusioned or under an Invisibility Cloak, or something. No one ever saw him, and no one's aware of anything he did. I think we know why he made sure to not make himself known."

"That's one good thing about what happened in December," said Neville. "He could have been a big factor here, if he hadn't been scared to show his face. But now, he's in a pretty bad way, isn't he? If any Death Eaters got away, it couldn't have been many, and now he's got practically nobody. I bet anyone who did get away didn't go back to him, so he's all by himself, more or less. He could recover, but he's in a much worse way than he was when he came back two and a half years ago."

“All because he couldn’t leave me alone,” said Harry. “He could have other Death Eaters that we don’t know about, and he’s Voldemort, anyway. We still have to be really careful. I just hope that nobody starts declaring victory.”

“I promise to slap down anyone in the Ministry who does,” said a nearby voice. Harry turned to see Bright standing behind him. Harry started to stand, but Bright put a hand on Harry’s shoulder, keeping him down. “This isn’t a formal occasion, Harry, it’s all right. Just taking a tour. How are you doing, Ginny?”

“For someone who just had both legs broken, not too bad,” she replied gamely.

He nodded, impressed. “To my surprise, I sense that you’re telling the truth.”

“Good thing you have to be in a line of sight,” she said, smiling at Harry.

Bright looked mystified, but Harry didn’t feel like explaining it just yet. “I assume they told you as soon as it happened?”

“Of course,” he said. “It was pretty tense, since I couldn’t get status reports, and there wasn’t much I could do. Well, there was, but it was just things like making sure the potions for the giants were being made, that St. Mungo’s was getting geared up, alerting crews to get rid of the bodies of any giants who died, like that. In other words, things that probably would have been done if I’d continued sleeping. But making sure that everything was ready made me feel somewhat useful, at least. I knew Kingsley would report when it was done.

“Well, I’m going to make the rounds, I just wanted to stop by and say hello. And, of course, to be one of the many who want to thank you, all of you, for what you did. Also, Harry, I meant what I said before. It’s politically tempting, but I know better. No celebration, no gloating. We’re still being cautious.”

“Ginny!” cried an anxious Molly as she rushed to Ginny’s side, pushing Bright out of the way in her haste to reach Ginny, who she leaned over and hugged tightly. Arthur was a few steps behind her; he stopped behind Harry’s chair, which Harry vacated so Molly or Arthur could have it.

“Mum, you just shoved the Minister of Magic,” teased Ron.

Still hugging Ginny, Molly replied, “He’s a father, he understands.”

Bright laughed. “Indeed I do, I would do the same if one of my children were on that bed.” Turning to Arthur, he shook his hand. “I want to thank both of you as well, for what you did tonight.”

With a small shrug, Arthur nodded. “We do what we can.”

“If everyone did that, we’d be very well-off indeed,” said Bright solemnly. He said goodbye to the group, then moved on to the next bed. Harry turned his attention to watching Molly fuss over Ginny. It’s over, he thought. For now, anyway.

It was five-thirty in the morning when Harry and the others finally returned to Hogwarts. The students had finished returning ten minutes ago, so Harry avoided Gryffindor Tower, not wanting to be asked for his account of what had happened just yet. He went to his quarters and lay down for a half hour, reveling in the silence, yet wishing Ginny were with him. He knew it would take far less long for her to heal than if she were being treated by Muggles, but he missed her anyway.

Deciding he wanted company after all, and reflecting on the irony of his choice, he walked to Snape’s quarters, which weren’t that far from his own. He knocked on the door, which promptly opened. “Oh, it’s you,” said Snape, standing in surprise. “Come in.”

“You were expecting someone else?”

“House-elves,” Snape explained. “I requested that breakfast be delivered not long ago.” Snape gestured Harry to a seat.

“I guess it is almost that time, I just hadn’t thought about food,” said Harry. He thought for a few seconds, then asked, “So, how badly do you think he’s hurt?”

Snape didn’t hesitate. “Very badly,” he said, with obvious satisfaction. “I viewed the bodies of the Death Eaters killed in the fall caused by your spell; to my surprise, a few were ones I did not know. He had clearly been recruiting, and I strongly suspect that he was not being as selective as he once would have been. I

have been able to ascertain that nearly every prominent Death Eater is now dead, or soon will be. The only one still at large is Lucius Malfoy.”

There was another knock on the door, and this time, it was three house-elves. They hurriedly set up the table, and Snape’s food. “You are welcome to stay and join me, if you’d like,” offered Snape.

Harry felt himself gaping, and tried to recover. “Yeah, sure,” he said.

“Bring another serving, and another place setting,” Snape brusquely instructed the house-elves. They bobbed their heads up and down, smiling, suggesting that there was nothing they would rather do than fulfill his request; they departed quickly.

“Help yourself to some bacon, or sausage, while you wait for yours,” Snape suggested as he sat at the table. “They always bring far too much.”

Harry knew that was true, so he sat opposite Snape and took a piece of bacon. Noting that Snape seemed in unusually good spirits, for him, Harry decided to risk a joke. “I see you haven’t gotten around to trying to be polite to the house-elves.”

“On the contrary,” replied Snape casually, as he finished the first bite of his toast, “they are thrilled with my behavior, as it is so much improved over what it used to be.”

“I guess I hadn’t thought of it that way,” Harry admitted.

“Besides, being polite would only encourage them,” added Snape, seemingly amused now. “Look at how they treat you, how uncomfortable it makes you. I know you could not bring yourself to be rude to a house-elf, but it does have its advantages.”

Harry chuckled a little. “I don’t know if you ever saw this in my memories, but Hermione and Ginny both think that Dobby would just love to be my personal house-elf after I graduate and get my own place.”

Snape looked even more amused; Harry felt as though Snape was trying not to smile. “Considering how he treats you, and your reactions to it, his being your house-elf would be much more a favor from you to him than from him to you.”

Harry felt that was a strange notion, but he could see Snape’s point. Deciding not to go further into the topic of house-elves, he asked, “Why do you suppose Malfoy wasn’t with the ones who were caught or killed?”

Snape looked thoughtful. “I suspect that he was functioning as the Dark Lord’s personal assistant, close to him at all times. In practical terms, the reason would be that if you found him, Malfoy’s job would be to distract you—” Seeing Harry react, Snape rolled his eyes and said, “You really must get over your adolescent associations with that word—while the Dark Lord made his escape.”

Somewhat embarrassed, Harry nevertheless protested, “I have to take my humor where I can get it, I don’t get nearly enough as it is. Anyway, I guess that makes sense, about Malfoy. It must be really embarrassing for Voldemort, to need that.”

“‘Degrading’ would be a more appropriate word,” suggested Snape. “Even before this morning, that he would require such an escort would be a painful reminder of how far he had fallen. Now, he has far more to worry about. The best thing for him to do would be to adopt the lowest possible profile, and attempt to gather forces again. This defeat, however, may harm his reputation to such an extent that it will be difficult for him to acquire followers.

“By the way, the new spell you used to such great effect... I assume this was one of your sudden inspirations?”

Harry shook his head. “Not mine, actually. Why don’t I just show you, it’ll be quicker.” Harry was so used to having Snape view his memories that it didn’t seem like a big deal. He kept the memory of what had happened at that point in the battle in the front of his mind. Snape reached for his wand, cast Legilimens, and viewed the memory.

Snape raised an eyebrow. “Fascinating. But I find it beyond surprising that the headmaster would interfere in such a way, so directly. It is contrary to much of what he has said in his current state; it is as if he handed you a powerful weapon when it was not certain that it was necessary. Your life was not in imminent danger; Aurors could have assisted you with your situation if you had allowed them to.”

“Yes, but then the giants would have taken the castle, or destroyed it,” pointed out Harry.

“True, but the headmaster has only intervened when your life was in grave peril,” responded Snape. “That was not the case here.”

“Well, it’s sort of a good thing that thought didn’t occur to me,” said Harry humorously. “There is more to the story, in fact. This is from soon after the battle, when we were visiting Ginny at St. Mungo’s.” Harry now focused his attention on the memory in which Ginny had explained how she had deceived him.

Snape viewed this memory, eyebrows high at first. He put down his wand, shook his head for a few seconds... then, to Harry’s astonishment, started laughing. He laughed for a long time, almost half a minute. Harry knew Snape was laughing at his expense, but he smiled anyway, because he was so happy to see Snape laughing. Snape took a deep breath as his laughter died down. “Excuse me... that probably lasted longer due to the novelty of the sensation,” he said, taking another breath. “People say, ‘I haven’t laughed that much in a long time,’ that is probably not truer for anyone more than I.

“I really must remember not to underestimate Miss Weasley in the future. She may be only an average student, but she clearly possesses a native intelligence and imagination far outstripping yours; you would never have thought of doing something like that. The humor may only be apparent to someone who knows you as well as I do, and your slowness to comprehend what she was telling you only made it funnier.”

Still smiling, Harry said, “At least I was right about one thing. I did say at one point that if you ever laughed, it would probably be at my expense. I do see the

humor in it, of course. And I don't mind you having a laugh, all my other—well, I guess at the time, I was too surprised to think it was funny.”

Harry had almost startled himself by having been about to say, ‘all my other friends.’ Did he really consider Snape a friend? It seemed a very strange notion, but thinking about it for a few seconds, he supposed he did, in a peculiar way. It wasn't something he wanted to say out loud, however. Snape gave him a penetrating look, as though what Harry had been about to say had been obvious, and Snape was curious to observe Harry's own reaction to what he had almost said.

Just then, there was another knock at the door. Snape opened it with his wand, and three house-elves came in, one of them Dobby. “Harry Potter!” he exclaimed breathlessly. “The other house-elves told Dobby that Harry Potter was here, so Dobby had to come. Harry Potter has saved the castle, saved our home, our lives—”

“Your lives?” Harry interrupted, as the elves set up his food. “You could get away at any time—oh, that's right, they were going to deploy the artifact. But you could have used a phoenix to get away.”

Dobby shook his head back and forth quickly. “House-elves must not leave their home, even if it is under attack. Many house-elves would have died. Harry Potter is so very heroic and courageous—”

“—and is surely far and away the most outstanding human being born in the history of the planet,” said Snape, his sarcasm obvious, “and after a long life as our greatest leader, will be elevated to the foremost spot in the pantheon of gods. You may leave.”

Dobby had been bobbing his head approvingly throughout Snape's comment, obviously in complete agreement. “Yes sirs, thank you sirs,” said all the elves in chorus, and quickly left.

Harry gave Snape a long-suffering look. “Please don't do that. You said I shouldn't encourage them, and here you do it.”

“I said nothing about you, I simply do not want to encourage them myself,” Snape pointed out with amusement. Well, I wanted him to be able to enjoy humor, thought Harry. Now I hope he can enjoy some humor that isn’t at my expense.

“Ah, I stand corrected,” said Harry sarcastically. “But your having said that will make them like you more, since you recognize my obvious greatness.”

“I had not considered that,” Snape admitted.

“You were having too much fun,” suggested Harry, now amused himself. “By the way, I wanted to ask, how is Neville doing in the Potions class?”

“I assume you are not asking about his potion-making skills, which are still subpar, but improving.” Harry nodded. “He is doing adequately. He is becoming more comfortable, or perhaps I should say, less uncomfortable. The first time, it was clearly an act of will for him simply to show up. He made several mistakes of the sort he made in the past due to nervousness, but after I demonstrated that I would act tolerantly and not use them as a pretext to abuse him, he made fewer and fewer. I almost wonder whether he unconsciously made the mistakes on purpose to see how I would react.”

“I don’t know much about psychology, as you know,” said Harry. “But I’m glad he’s doing better. I know he’s trying, I see him and Ron studying it together a lot. They try not to ask Hermione for help unless they really have to.”

Harry then asked Snape for his account of his part of the battle, and ate his breakfast as he listened. It still felt strange to be having breakfast with Snape, but it also felt good.

After breakfast, Harry went to Auror headquarters and talked to Kingsley, getting more information about everything that had happened in the battle. They had captured forty-five Dark wizards, only three of whom were Death Eaters; most of the rest had been among those set free from the foreign wizard prisons. Harry wondered whether Voldemort would now try to recruit from the prison populations of the non-English-speaking countries; Kingsley told him that after the prison



breaks, security at most wizarding prisons had been beefed up. Harry asked if the ones they had in custody now would be executed; Kingsley thought they almost certainly would, and that doing so would heavily complicate any future Voldemort recruiting efforts. Harry knew that was true, and tried not to think about it. He then visited Hagrid and Grawp; Grawp's English had significantly improved, and Harry was able to have a basic conversation with him, to Hagrid's obvious pride.

As he left the Forbidden Forest—due to Grawp's presence, they couldn't talk in Hagrid's hut—he was approached by Dennis Creevey. "Harry, could I talk to you for a minute?" asked Dennis anxiously.

"Sure, what is it?"

"I was wondering if you could talk to Colin. He seems really depressed."

"Do you know why?" asked Harry. Colin was usually cheerful, Harry knew.

"He won't really talk, but we—Andrea and I—think we know why. We think it's because he didn't join the battle. Our parents told him not to, and he's not seventeen, but we think that's why."

Harry had no idea that Colin hadn't joined the battle; he hadn't stopped to notice who had and who hadn't. "He might just need some time to work it through. But I'll go say hello to him, see if he's in the mood to talk. Where is he?"

"Ron looked on the map for me," said Dennis. "He's in the Quidditch stands, sitting in his usual spot for announcing the matches."

"Well, that's going to make my finding him a little more conspicuous," Harry joked. "But at least we'll be able to talk privately. Okay, I'll go there now."

"Thanks," said Dennis.

Harry walked off toward the stadium. As he walked, he glanced over at the lake, and saw someone sitting under the tree that both he and Ernie had sat under; a closer look told him it was Justin. Harry took a deep breath, as he felt Ernie's loss more keenly than he had since hearing about it. Imagining how it affected Justin, he guessed that Justin felt how he would feel if Ron had been killed. Harry considered walking over and sitting with Justin, but what could he say? No words about how

worthwhile Ernie's sacrifice would help, Harry was sure; no words at all would help. Continuing on his way to the Quidditch stadium, Harry sent his feelings and an image of Justin to Hermione. A few seconds later, she responded, letting him know that she would look for Susan on the map, so she could be with Justin if she thought it would help.

A few minutes later, Harry entered the stadium and walked to where Colin usually sat. Colin finally looked up and saw Harry as he climbed the last ten steps to get to where Colin was.

Colin gave him a quizzical look, obviously wondering why Harry was there. "Just felt like going for a walk," said Harry casually.

Colin chuckled. "At least you're not trying to fool anyone. Who sent you?"  
"Dennis."

Colin shook his head. "So, I feel bad for not being very brave, and he sends the bravest person in England to talk to me. Good job, Dennis."

"He means well, Colin. But I can leave—"

"No, I didn't mean that. I know he doesn't want me to feel bad, he said it at the Ministry while we were waiting. It's just kind of ironic."

"He told me that your parents told you not to go."

"Yeah, and then he volunteered to go. That didn't make me feel much better."

"You did what your parents wanted you to do; you're not seventeen. That makes it the right thing to have done."

"Harry, at least four sixth year Gryffindors who aren't seventeen went even though their parents told them not to. There must be some difference between me and them."

"Would you have gone if your parents had said you could?" asked Harry.

"I think so," admitted Colin. "I hope so. But that's not what happened, so it's hard to say. It's also not easier because... I do think one of the reasons I didn't go anyway is that I don't think I would have been that much help. I'm not a good

flier, and I'm not that good at Defense Against the Dark Arts, you know that. I know the spells okay, I just can't do them as well as a lot of people can. It was easy to talk myself into not going, for that reason. But I can't get rid of the idea that I was just too much of a coward to go."

Harry could see the misery Colin was in, and he felt for him. "Colin, last year after Hogsmeade, I had a conversation like this with Ernie. He felt bad that he didn't join the Diffusion to save me. This year... he may have been Head Boy, but he wasn't that good a flier, and was below average in Defense Against the Dark Arts. But today, he went anyway."

Colin sighed. "And now he's dead, is your point."

"That's part of my point, yes," agreed Harry. "That was the risk, a very real one. And even though some went when they shouldn't have, that doesn't change the fact that it wasn't really your decision to make; it was your parents', and you did what you were supposed to do. Think about how they would have felt if you'd gone and gotten killed."

"I know," said Colin, nodding. "I talked to Cindy while we were waiting, she told me about the talk you had with her. The seven of us—the seven sixth years who didn't go—felt kind of conspicuous, and some of us talked to each other. None of us felt good about not going. I know what you said to her, I see the point. It's just hard for me to change the way I feel about it."

"It may just take some time," Harry suggested.

"I don't know," said Colin disconsolately.

As they sat in silence, Harry not sure of what more to say, he wondered whether he should have waited longer to talk to Colin. I guess I'm not cut out to be a counselor, he thought. He looked at Colin and said, "Well, just keep in mind that I don't blame you, and I think you shouldn't blame yourself. I'm just glad you're still here."

"Thanks," said Colin. With a straight face, he added, "You go on ahead, I'll stay here and practice my Quidditch announcing."

Harry smiled. “Not that you need it, your announcing’s very good. But you can work on more ways to give us positional information.”

Colin chuckled. “I’ll do that.” Harry stood, and gave Colin’s shoulder a squeeze, then patted it, and started down the steps.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later, on Sunday evening, Harry entered the Gryffindor common room and sat with the others, already working on homework. “What kept you?” asked Ginny, taking his hand as he sat. “You said you’d be here in a few minutes, and that was ten minutes ago.”

“It was kind of a surprise,” he said, keeping his voice down. “Corner stopped me, he wanted to apologize for last week, the Quidditch match.”

“He apologized to you, but not to me?” asked Ginny indignantly.

“He said it was to both of us, he said to tell you,” said Harry. “I think it probably would have been harder to do it with you, since you used to date him.”

“Like I care about that anymore,” she scoffed. “I’d be surprised if he does. But I guess it was probably hard for him to do it at all. Did he say anything except for that?”

“Basically, just that he was mad about being scored on so much, and that he still doesn’t think it’s fair, even though he knows it’s the school rule. He admitted that he thought that I bought your Firebolt for Quidditch, that I just liked to spend money extravagantly to show off that I had it. But he said he changed his mind after the battle, that he understood what it was for, and that you and Ron were very important to that. And that the battle kind of put the Quidditch thing in perspective for him. That was pretty much it, I think. I was checking him, he was sincere.”

“Well, that was good of him,” said Hermione, seemingly hoping to encourage Ginny to accept the apology as Harry had.

“Would’ve been better if he’d made sure he talked to both of us, but yes, I suppose so,” she said grudgingly.

“By the way, Neville’s not here because he just got called by Professor McGonagall,” said Hermione.

“I know, I passed him on the way, he was following the cat,” said Harry. “I looked at him, and he just did this,” he added, imitating Neville’s shrug.

“I think I know why she called him,” said Hermione excitedly. “She has to appoint another Head Boy, I think she’s considering him.”

“She waited the week out of respect for Ernie, I take it,” said Ron.

Hermione nodded. “I assume so. But I hope Neville gets it, that would be so great.”

Harry agreed, as Ginny asked, “By the way, did the Slytherin second years ever get punished for joining the battle?”

“Well, I know that McGonagall gave them all a ten-minute lecture on how irresponsible and dangerous it was, how the fact that Fawkes was willing to take them didn’t make it all right, and so on,” said Harry, having heard about it from Hedrick. “She told them that if it was up to her, they’d get a month’s worth of detentions, but that it was up to Snape.”

“And what’d he do?” asked Ginny.

Harry smiled. “He gave them one detention each.”

The others were amazed. “Boy, he sure showed them,” joked Ron. “They ought to kiss your feet for giving him his other half back.”

“I can do without the feet-kissing, but yes, I think that had something to do with it,” said Harry. “I didn’t ask him about it, but he talked to them a little during the detention. He said that what they did ‘was not a very Slytherin thing to do,’ but that they had the right idea. They told me that their impression was that he was easy on them because they were trying to help me, and because they were doing something to fight Voldemort, which Snape really approves of.”

“Wow,” marveled Ron.

“I think that about sums it up,” agreed Hermione.

They got down to their homework, until Neville arrived twenty minutes later. In response to Hermione’s inquiring glance, he said, “She called me in to tell me that she seriously considered me for Head Boy,” shaking his head in wonder at the thought. “She said she felt I deserved it, and some other nice things. But she decided to give it to Justin. She said he was a very good candidate too, and that since the job came open because of Ernie’s death, she wanted to keep it in Hufflepuff.”

“I can see that,” said Hermione reluctantly, “especially since Hufflepuff lost two seventh years, Ernie and Jonathan. It’s been a pretty hard week for Justin and the other two. Justin never cared about being Head Boy, but I have a feeling he’ll take it seriously because he’s taking over for his friend. But you did deserve it, Neville. I’m sorry you didn’t get it.”

“Well, I feel like it was an honor just to be considered for it,” said Neville, “and to have her say the things she did. I was really proud, and I know Gran would have been too.”

“She was proud of you for who you were, not what you did,” said Harry.

“After she died, yes,” agreed Neville. “This has been a year of ‘almosts’ for me, I was thinking on the way back here. Almost made Head Boy, almost chosen by a phoenix... come on, you know I’m not complaining,” he protested to Hermione’s wounded look. “It was just an interesting coincidence.”

“You know I still feel kind of bad about that, that she chose me and not you,” said Hermione sadly.

“I wish you wouldn’t, and yes, I know you can’t,” said Neville. To the others, he added, “We’ve had this conversation ten times, or variations of it. She still feels bad, and nothing I can say can change that.”

“Well, Neville, there’s another way to look at the ‘almost’ thing, if it makes you feel any better,” said Ron. “Almost killed, almost had a huge rift in your relationship...”

“Almost lost my head and tried to torture someone into insanity,” Neville added thoughtfully, keeping his voice down. “Good point, sometimes it’s better if the almosds don’t happen.”

And I almost got Voldemort, thought Harry, though he knew better than to say it out loud. It would seem too self-pitying, and he didn’t want the others to feel they should have to reassure him that he’d done enough. When Voldemort is no longer a threat, he thought, then I’ll have done enough. I don’t care if it’s just him alone, or him with Lucius Malfoy, or him with an army. I have to find him, I have to get him. And I will.

One of the consequences of the battle was that killed or captured Dark wizards left behind many brooms on the battlefield, including twenty-eight Firebolts. Since both Aurors and Hogwarts students had fought in the battle, Kingsley suggested that they divide them equally, but McGonagall declined, citing the Aurors’ greater need for them. Kingsley agreed to take twenty-two, increasing the Aurors’ total of Firebolts to forty, which was enough for eight more Aurors than they currently had. McGonagall kept the other six, and two weeks after the battle, arranged to trade two of them for eighteen used Nimbus 2001's. To Snape’s outrage, she then distributed six each to the Heads of House of Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff, along with one Firebolt to each House. Starting next year, she announced, each team would use six Nimbus 2001's and one Firebolt for the Seeker, and private brooms would no longer be allowed. At the same time, she said, the brooms were not to be used at all until the next year, as some matches had already been played under the old system, and that it wasn’t appropriate to change the rules in mid-season.

Two weeks after the attack on Hogwarts, the forty-five captured in the attack were executed. At Harry’s urging, and, Harry assumed, Madeline’s, Bright did not review all of the condemned with Legilimens himself, but he did do a third of them, most of them from America or Australia. He reported to Harry that,

disturbingly, some of these people had never killed, and had been convicted of non-violent crimes such as theft. With more qualms than before, Bright allowed the executions to proceed, since these people could be broken out as well. Harry pointed out that Voldemort could simply start breaking people out of other countries' wizarding prisons, and they would be forced to capture and kill them, too. Bright said he felt in was unlikely, and that the same reasoning that applied to killing the other ones applied to this situation as well. Harry again considered speaking out against it, and again decided not to. Bright assured Harry that all had willingly allied themselves with Voldemort, and that tipped the balance for Harry against opposing it.

At the end of February, Harry conducted his semi-monthly energy-of-love testing. To his delight, if not his surprise, Hedrick reached 100, as did Augustina. Eight students in all developed the ability to use the energy of love, six of them Hufflepuffs: two third year girls, two fifth year girls, and Justin and Susan. Harry was very pleased; not as many were getting it as he would have liked, but when he recalled that before the year began he had worried that few or no students would learn it, eleven seemed like a lot. The younger Hufflepuffs' success in particular stirred more interest in study groups.

March was a very quiet month, both at Hogwarts and in the wizarding world in general. There were no more Death Eater attacks; except for the battle, Death Eaters had caused no deaths in the new year so far. In mid-March, the Prophet ran an article suggesting that Voldemort was, for all practical purposes, defeated, and it contained quotes from an anonymous Ministry source supporting the notion. True to his word, Bright identified the source (using Legilimens, Harry was sure), and made it clear that his career would take a dramatic turn for the worse if he ever again did anything similar. The next day's main article emphasized the Ministry's, and the Aurors', continuing determination to track down and eliminate Voldemort. Still, the wizarding world was starting to relax. In a way, Harry was glad that people were no longer terrified, but hoped that their vigilance and support for



the effort to get rid of Voldemort wouldn't wane. Dentus had told him that many people's memories were short; Harry hoped they weren't that short.

In the evening of the fourth Monday of March, Harry and the other five were sitting on the conjured carpet in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Ron and Neville were talking about their private Potions classes with Snape, which had been joined from the beginning by Justin, Susan, and Terry, all of whom had to persuade Snape that they wanted to become Aurors. The conversation turned to the topic of them becoming Aurors.

"So, do you think all five of us will manage it?" Ron asked Neville.

"I don't see why not," said Neville. "Everyone seems serious about it, and not just because they volunteered to take Potions from Snape. It would be good if we all make it; within three years we'd be back up to thirty-seven, assuming no one retires. Thirty-eight, if Harry joins. Still no idea yet, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. "For some reason, I'd rather put it off as long as possible. I'm not sure anything has changed in how I look at it; I sort of wish I could do both."

"Well, you know you can be a part-time Auror if you stay on at Hogwarts," said Neville. "But I guess you mean you wish you could do both full-time. I thought maybe the eight 100's last month might have pushed you a bit more to stay."

"Pansy's mostly responsible for four of the eleven we've had so far," pointed out Harry. "I could go be an Auror, she could stay and teach special classes on the energy of love."

"First of all, it's more you than me, and you know it, so don't argue with me," Pansy said, mock-sternly. "We don't know how good I'd be at teaching it to people who didn't have a lot of affection for me already. And secondly, I already have other career plans anyway."

"Really? What?" asked Harry.

"Did I never tell you?" she asked, surprised. "I think everyone else already knows. I decided early this year that I want to be a Healer. After Hogwarts, I'm

going to take the graduate course they offer at St. Mungo's; it takes three years. Professor McGonagall told me that she talked to Healer Haspberg, and she's sure I can get into the course. Healer Haspberg said she'd be interested to see how the energy of love would work when applied to Healing."

"Wow... no, I had no idea," said Harry, slightly embarrassed that the others had known, but not him. "That sounds great."

"Yes, it's a really good idea," agreed Ginny.

Pansy chuckled. "I know why you think that." To Harry, she explained, "The first time I told her, she said it was good, because if any of your children had problems, she could just go straight to me."

"Yes, I've already explained why it would be good for her to specialize in Healing children," said Ginny helpfully.

"She means, of course, that I should specialize in Healing Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley's children," said Pansy, with a smile at Ginny. "I already told her, it's not as though I wouldn't do that anyway. Your children are never going to suffer from a lack of being looked after, I'm very sure."

"Not with Mum around," said Ginny. "She'd be going crazy just hearing us talk about this. I can only imagine what she's going to be like when she has an actual grandchild."

"It'll be something to see," agreed Ron.

Neville tilted his head. "Did you hear something?"

"No, what?" asked Hermione.

"I don't know, just a little noise." Neville shrugged. "Maybe I imagined it."

"So, Neville," asked a smiling Ginny, "What do you two think, about kids?"

Neville and Hermione looked at each other. "We are interested in having them," said Neville, "but there are practical issues. We're both going to have careers, so we would have to work that out. I'm sure Hermione's parents would like to look after children sometimes, but they both have careers too."

“I’m sure you both know, Mum would love to,” Ginny assured them. “Even though they wouldn’t exactly be her grandchildren, she...”

Ginny trailed off as something small and brown dashed between her and Pansy, stopping in the center of the circle formed by the six of them. As it nervously darted its head from side to side, Harry saw that it was an old-looking, beaten-up brown rat, with a tattered left ear... and a silver right front paw.