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CHAPTER 22

THREE BY THREE

Harry felt a chill go through him. What is he doing here? he asked himself. He just walks, well, scurries in here and offers himself up? Whatever this is, it can't be good.

"What? What is it?" asked Neville, responding to the others' shocked looks.

Harry realized that Neville couldn't see the silver paw from where he was sitting. "It's Pettigrew." Deciding it was better to be safe than sorry, Harry immediately conjured a small cage with four sides and a top but no bottom around Pettigrew. The rat ran up to the side of the cage and tried to squeeze through the bars, but they were too close together. Then, trying to take advantage of the thickness of the carpet, he tried to burrow underneath the bottom of one of the sides, nudging the cage up with his nose. Harry put a stop to that by conjuring a large stone on top of the cage. The cage sank into the carpet and nipped the rat's nose; he squealed and retreated to the center of the cage.

"Was that necessary, Harry?" asked Hermione. "He came in here on his own, after all—"

"And I want to make sure he doesn't change his mind and leave on his own," responded Harry abruptly. "It's pretty easy for a rat to get away, we saw that four years ago." He regarded the rat for a few seconds, then looked at Hermione; he sent that he wanted her to ask Flora to bring McGonagall, and that he intended to ask Fawkes to bring Snape. She nodded, and within seconds, McGonagall and Snape were there.

They looked at Harry quizzically for a second, then looked at the cage; Harry moved the stone off the top so they could see better. McGonagall's eyes

went wide as she recognized the rat; Snape's reaction was a smirk. "He just showed up, ran onto the carpet," Harry informed them. "I put the cage there just to be safe."

Snape let out a dark-sounding chuckle. "Though I did not bother to predict this, it was utterly predictable. Once again, he seeks the protection of the side which seems to have the upper hand."

"But why would he come?" asked Pansy. "He must know they're executing Death Eaters."

"He clearly believes," replied Snape, "that Professor Potter will protect him. He has betrayed the Dark Lord, and has useful information which could lead to his final defeat. He wishes to trade that information for his liberty, and protection from the fate he so richly deserves."

"Are you using Legilimens on him? Is that how you know that?" asked Ron.

Snape shook his head. "One cannot gather useful information by performing Legilimens on someone in animal form. I have simply stated what is obvious."

"But he has nothing to bargain with," pointed out Ron. "You, or Harry, or Hermione could just take the information from him. I assume you will."

"Naturally," agreed Snape, his dislike and contempt for Pettigrew clear every time he glanced at the cage. "But he knows that Professor Potter is a person of honor, and Pettigrew's presence is his side of an implicit bargain. He does not think that Professor Potter will take the information and allow him to be executed, though I hope to persuade the professor that it would not be such a bad, or dishonorable, thing."

Harry stared at the cage. He recalled that the person inside it had been the direct cause of his parents' deaths. Pettigrew had as good as killed Sirius, framing him for murder and causing him to spend twelve years locked up for a crime he didn't commit. And he had been instrumental in bringing Voldemort back, making him indirectly responsible for all the deaths Voldemort or Death Eaters had caused

since Voldemort's return. Harry started to find Snape's suggestion somewhat appealing.

He didn't want to commit himself. "Let's not worry about that yet, let's just figure out why he's here." He waved his wand, and both of the room's doors slammed shut. Looking at the cage, he said, "I'm going to get rid of the cage. When I do that, you become human, okay?"

The rat seemed to react with panic, scrambling around the walls of the cage. Annoyed, Harry said, "We're not going to get very far if we can't communicate with you. All right, we'll do this anyway. Professor Snape, I assume you know the spell that forces him into human form?"

Snape nodded. "As soon as he starts changing, withdraw the cage." Snape pointed his wand at the now-frantic rat, and the instant the rat started changing, the cage flew off to one side. Within a few seconds he was Peter Pettigrew... and as soon as he was, he started screaming, clearly in horrible pain.

Harry's friends drew back, startled. "Harry, stop!" shouted Hermione, apparently assuming that Harry was using the Imperius Charm.

"I'm not doing anything!" he shouted back, hoping to be heard over Pettigrew's screaming.

McGonagall waved her wand, and Pettigrew transformed back into a rat. Snape shot her a glance which suggested his unhappiness with what she had done. Harry placed the cage back over the rat.

"What was that all about?" asked a stunned Ron. "You'd think someone was doing the Cruciatus Curse on him."

"I cast Legilimens as soon as he transformed," said Snape. "It was not long enough to get much information, but I was able to determine the source of his discomfort." Harry raised his eyebrows at Snape's use of the word; Snape's indifference to Pettigrew's agony reminded Harry of the 'old' Snape. I guess, thought Harry, at least this means I did the reverse Cleansing properly, he obviously still has his dark side.

“Before he left the Dark Lord, the Dark Lord placed a spell on him to prevent him from doing what he is now doing. The spell is meant to cause him intense pain should he even contemplate seeking out Professor Potter, never mind actually doing so. When he is in the form of a rat, however, the spell is ineffective. He has traveled here as a rat, and any return to human form will cause the sort of reaction we just witnessed.”

Pretty nasty, thought Harry, but typical of Voldemort. It did seem, however, to raise more questions than it answered. Ron asked one. “Wouldn’t Voldemort know that, though? That it wouldn’t work on him in his rat form?”

“One would think so,” agreed Snape, “which leads me to believe there is at least a reasonable possibility, if not a strong one, that the Dark Lord intended for Pettigrew to do as he has done. Otherwise, why let him live?”

“Maybe he put the spell on Pettigrew a long time ago, soon after he came back, so Pettigrew wouldn’t even think of betraying him to me,” suggested Harry.

“It is possible,” agreed Snape. “Needless to say, we must know more.”

“But we can’t do Legilimens on him for minutes while he screams and screams,” said Hermione, appearing concerned for Pettigrew despite herself.

“Of course, we would Silence him first, and bind him with ropes,” said Snape casually. “And before you look at me like that, Mr. Longbottom, remember what he has done.”

“It’s more the way you say it, like you’d enjoy watching him suffer,” responded Neville, giving Snape a wary look, as if wondering how much he could get away with.

“Professor Potter does not seem unduly disturbed at the prospect,” noted Snape.

Staring at the rat, Harry nodded. “No, I’m not. He’d have to suffer like that for weeks before he’d suffer a tenth of the misery he’s caused. But we won’t do that unless we have to. Professor, has he been Cleansed?” Snape nodded. “Okay, then this is what we do. Make him human again; I’ll use the Imperius Charm on him. It’ll

take him fifteen or twenty seconds to go unconscious, and then we can use Legilimens to find out what he knows. Can more than one of us do Legilimens at once?”

“Only one can manipulate the memories,” explained Snape. “Others may view the same memories, but not control them. I will be the one to search, of course.”

“All right,” agreed Harry. “But just be sure to get his last meeting with Voldemort. And don’t forget to...” He trailed off as Snape communicated his annoyance without words. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to be a backseat driver.”

Snape didn’t bother to conceal his irritation. “The headmaster found such Muggle idioms to be quaint. Unsurprisingly, I do not. Professors, are you ready?”

Harry and Hermione nodded, and Snape forced Pettigrew to become human again as Harry yanked the cage away. Harry used the Imperius Charm immediately, and Pettigrew’s screaming grew even more intense, now that he was in two kinds of pain. Harry focused on keeping the Imperius Charm going, and finally Pettigrew went unconscious. Snape cast Legilimens, then nodded to Harry and Hermione that they could do so as well.

It took a long time, over a half hour, for Snape to view all the memories he thought worth viewing. As they watched, Harry realized that Snape had definitely been the best one to do it; as he had with Harry, Snape effortlessly went from memory to memory, all of them significant to what they were looking for. At one point, Pettigrew started to stir, and Harry had to use the Charm on him again.

“I believe that is all that is necessary for now,” Snape eventually said, putting down his wand. McGonagall waved hers, and Pettigrew became a rat again; she then placed the cage Harry had conjured over him again.

“That’s quite a story,” remarked Harry, amazed at what he had seen. “Now, the question is, who else do we tell?”

“Mr. Shacklebolt, definitely,” said Snape. “And the Minister will have to know sooner or later; perhaps it is better that he know now. I cannot think of

anyone else with an immediate need to know. Perhaps the two of you would summon them with your phoenixes.”

Harry nodded at Hermione, sending to Fawkes that he wanted him to appear near Bright, suggesting he check Bright’s home first, then the Ministry. Ten seconds later, Kingsley appeared with Flora; soon thereafter, Fawkes carried Bright into the room. “That was interesting; I’ve never been summoned in quite that way before,” commented Bright, amused. Suddenly turning serious, he asked, “What’s going on?”

Everyone had stood while the phoenixes were gone, and Harry had added a bottom to the cage and moved it to the top of a desk. McGonagall gestured to it and said, “Kingsley, Minister... this is Peter Pettigrew.”

The two exchanged a startled look, and as one, bent for a closer look at the cage. “Ah, yes, the silver paw,” said an impressed Kingsley. “But why is he in the form of a rat?”

Harry explained what had happened before they had arrived, then looked at Snape. “Professor, do you want to tell the story?” He Vanished the carpet, and formed a circle of ten desks. Snape began speaking as they sat.

“I should begin by reminding everyone present that what follows is what Pettigrew knows, or thinks he knows; it is not necessarily the truth.

“Most of the important information is based on a conversation he overheard between the Dark Lord and Lucius Malfoy the day he left. Just before this conversation, the Dark Lord dismissed Pettigrew from his service, saying that he had no further use for him. Pettigrew made halfhearted protestations of his fealty and continuing desire to serve, but both he and the Dark Lord knew he was not being truthful. The Dark Lord told him he did not care what Pettigrew did from that point, and that Pettigrew’s final reward for his assistance in bringing the Dark Lord back was that, having outlived his usefulness, he would be allowed to live. As the meeting ended, the Dark Lord ordered him to fetch Malfoy into his presence, then cast the spell whose effects we have observed.

“Pettigrew did as he was ordered, but instead of leaving, transformed into a rat and headed back to where the Dark Lord was talking to Malfoy. I will pause in the narrative to point out that this is the crux of whether the information that follows is genuine or not. Would the Dark Lord be so careless as to allow himself to be overheard? Or did he know that Pettigrew would attempt to return to Professor Potter, despite the spell, and stage the conversation so as to be overheard, and plant misinformation? My personal opinion is that it is likely that the conversation was staged, but nonetheless provided true information. I will elaborate on this later.

“The conversation between the Dark Lord and Malfoy was fairly lengthy, and concerned the Dark Lord’s long-term plans. The Dark Lord admitted to Malfoy that he thought it possible that Professor Potter could disable or even defeat him; though he expressed contempt at the professor’s inability to kill, he appeared to be even more afraid of what the professor might do to him than he would be of dying. ‘He means to inflict upon me a living death,’ were the Dark Lord’s exact words, and that is no doubt how he sees it. They discussed the reports of the change in my behavior, and agreed that Professor Potter had managed to reverse the Cleansing, something which neither would have believed possible.

“The Dark Lord then expressed concern about his future prospects. I pause in the narrative again to say that this is an exceptional conversation for the Dark Lord; it is not like him at all to admit any weakness. His admissions lend verisimilitude to the conversation, but again, we cannot know his intentions. To continue, he said to Malfoy: ‘He will not give up, Lucius. I saw this in his mind. I could hide and never be heard from again, and still he would seek me out. Due to that cursed prophecy, he believes that it is his destiny.’” Harry saw his friends looking at him with sympathy, trying to understand the burden he had carried for so long.

“The Dark Lord then explained to Malfoy his plan, which he had been working on in secret for the past month. He said that he had created a Ring of

Reduction with a number of highly unusual characteristics; for one, this Ring would be three by three, with a total of nine rooms. This was believed to be impossible, but he has done it; Pettigrew later, as he was leaving, found the Ring and confirmed this.

“The Dark Lord told Malfoy that he would hide in the Ring itself, using a magical form of suspended animation. This was also not known to be possible, but I do not doubt the Dark Lord’s ability to accomplish such a thing. He will inhabit the ninth room of the Ring, after having set obstacles in the other eight rooms which he felt would surely eliminate anyone who managed to gain entry. He intends to stay there for two hundred years.”

The others wore expressions of awe. “Why two hundred years?” asked Ron.

Harry answered. “He would be long forgotten by then... but more importantly, I would be long dead. If it is true that I’m the only one that can beat him—and since no one else can do the Imperius Charm, that may be the case—then he would come out in two hundred years, and there would be no one capable of beating him. His reputation wouldn’t be damaged like it is now; he could start over, be more careful, and probably succeed. He couldn’t kill me, but he can avoid me. It makes sense. Whether they let Pettigrew hear that part or not, I’m inclined to believe it’s true.”

“So that’s it then, we’re rid of him,” said Ron, his tone suggesting he dared not believe it. “If what Pettigrew heard is true, he’s gone, he won’t be a threat in our lifetime.”

“And what about the people two hundred years from now?” challenged Harry.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about that anyway, is there?” asked Ron. “You can’t get into one of those things unless you’re a close family member, and he doesn’t have any of those. No one can get in.”

Looking around, Harry saw that Hermione was looking down, her expression one of sadness. He saw that McGonagall and Snape knew, too, but no

one else did. Snape explained it to Ron. “No, Mr. Weasley, he has no family members. But remember, the blood connection is what is necessary. Having the same blood as the person in question will do nicely.”

Realization dawned on the faces of the others, and tears started to come to Ginny’s eyes. “Oh, no,” she gasped, starting to cry. “You can’t, you can’t, you can’t...”

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I have to.”

“No, you don’t!” she yelled. “He’s gone, you can have that normal life you’ve always wanted! We can have children, they can grow up knowing their father...” The tears stopped her from speaking further; she struggled to stop them.

He took a deep breath. “And what about the people two hundred years from now? He’ll come out, they won’t know him, they won’t be able to stop him—”

“Who knows what might happen then? I don’t care about the people two hundred years from now, I care about now! You risked enough, you’ve done enough...”

“I have to do this,” he said. “I have to get him.”

“Why, because it’s your destiny?” she asked bitterly.

“No. Because I’m the only one who can.”

“What if you can’t?” she asked desperately. “What if you go in there and get killed? Who knows what he’s put in there?”

“I was going to mention, Harry, that it will be very dangerous, probably more dangerous than anything you have ever faced,” said McGonagall solemnly. “He will be able to manipulate the rooms in more ways than is usual, set up conditions and environments of his exact choosing. It would not take me long to think of ways to set up rooms that even you could not get past.”

“I’ve always been able to come up with stuff when I’ve had to,” said Harry stubbornly. “I’ll do what I have to.”

“Excuse me for interrupting,” said Bright, “but Harry, I think we should seriously consider the question of whether you should go at all. And not just from

the standpoint of your safety, which I care about as well, but of society's. If we let him stay in that box, we're safe, we're rid of him. But he could have it set up that if anyone goes in there and dies, the... suspended animation ends early, and he comes back out. You'd be gone, and if you're the only one that can beat him, we'd be in big trouble. You could be putting our whole society at risk. And Ginny's right, we don't know what will happen in two hundred years. Maybe by then the energy of love will be truly widespread, and they could fight him better. Maybe you're just the only one of *this* generation who can beat him. Maybe the prophecy didn't consider this question."

"The most recent prophecy," said Snape, "said that the course the headmaster took when he sacrificed himself was the one and only way to defeat the Dark Lord. I do not believe it meant, only within a certain time frame."

"So, you think he should go," said Kingsley.

"Yes, but my opinion is irrelevant," said Snape, with a small shrug. "The fact is, he will go. I have seen his most important memories, from his perspective. I know him better than any of you, perhaps even you, Miss Weasley. He will go; it would be utterly counter to his character to do anything else. And, Miss Weasley..." Looking at Snape, Harry was amazed to see what he was sure was compassion in Snape's eyes. "He *will* come back."

"I will," Harry affirmed, taking her hand. "I'm sure of it."

"You can't know that," she said, still very emotional. "I'll tell you what, if you're so sure, take me with you. You can take one person. Take me."

Having already thought about it, he sighed. "You're the one I want to take with me. Please believe that. But I should take the person whose coming along makes it most likely that I'll come back."

"If you're so sure that you'll make it, it shouldn't matter who you take with you," she challenged him, but he could see in her eyes that she knew she wouldn't win the argument.

“I am sure, but what I just said is the smart thing to do, the best thing to do.”

“I should be the one to accompany you, Professor,” said Snape firmly. “My extensive knowledge of Dark magic would be extremely helpful.”

“Yes, it would,” agreed Harry, “but the problem is, the best person to go is someone with an extensive knowledge of magic, and the ability to use the energy of love. Somehow, I think that’s going to be very important.”

“Well, I think we all know who he just described,” said Ron, looking at Hermione.

She met Neville’s gaze. “Neville, if he asked you to go, you would. So, please don’t tell me I shouldn’t.”

Neville slowly nodded. “I know, I would. It’s just harder to accept when it’s the person you love than when it’s you.” He looked back and forth at Harry and Hermione and said, “You had already decided this, hadn’t you. When you were viewing the memory?”

“It was more that we knew than that we decided,” said Hermione. “We both knew that he would go, and that I was the person to go with him. We only checked through the phoenixes to make sure, but we both knew.”

“I say again, nothing is decided,” put in Bright. “Let’s not go charging ahead deciding who’s doing what. Speaking as the representative of the people, the people deserve a voice in this. You’re making decisions that have a far greater effect than yourselves if you’re unsuccessful.”

Snape gave Bright a disdainful look. “He has risked himself many times to fight the Dark Lord. He has always been the one to make the decision. How is this any different?”

“Because in this case,” countered Bright, “there is an alternative to fighting, one where we can live in peace. Before, he was never putting our long-term safety at risk. Here, he might be.”

“I would think even you would agree that he has earned the right to make this decision,” argued Snape.

“When he’s taking risks that are mainly his, yes,” said Bright. “But the people—”

“The people are who he has put himself on the line to save, time and time again!” shouted Snape. “The ones who fight, who suffer, who put themselves at risk, they are the ones with the right to choose! The people you represent are the ones who go about living their daily lives, with only a tiny risk of anything happening to them. The way in which you most represent the people of which you speak is that you are the only one in this room who has not actively fought the Dark Lord! Do not speak to me of ‘the people!’”

There was a silence, as Snape and Bright looked daggers at each other. “Professor,” said Harry quietly, “he did take a risk just by—”

“Thank you, Harry, but I can defend myself,” said Bright curtly. Glaring at Snape, he said, “I know what you’ve done, Professor—”

“You know nothing of what I’ve done,” spat Snape contemptuously

“I know far more than you think,” responded Bright confidently. Harry saw Snape’s hand subtly reach for his wand, and he wondered if Snape planned on using it, but his hand just rested on it. “You who fight Voldemort may do it for revenge, to protect all people, to protect your loved ones, or just because it’s the right thing to do. But whatever your motivation, what you do affects society. Society honors those who do, like Harry and his friends, as they would you if they knew what you have done. If you don’t do it for the sake of society, fine. But you cannot decide that you are answerable to no one, no matter how many risks you’ve taken, or burdens you’ve carried.

“And Harry, while that wasn’t directed at you, it applies to you as well. As I said before, this isn’t just about you. You seem to have decided, but I say again, it isn’t only your decision to make. I would just ask you to think about it dispassionately.”

Harry found that he tended to agree with Snape, that this decision shouldn't be made on the basis of politics or popularity, even given that there was indeed a risk to everyone. "Whether I'm dispassionate or not, there's still the question of those people two hundred years from now," he said, voice slightly raised in annoyance at Bright's attitude, which was exactly what he'd come to expect of a politician. "He's still threatening people, it's just not us anymore. So, we should just let him go? Did he just become 'someone else's problem?'"

Bright managed not to look at Kingsley, though Harry was sure that Bright knew where Harry had heard the phrase. "It's not that simple, Harry," responded Bright, his expression unreadable. "Nor was it when I said that before."

Harry didn't accept that; to him, this was a simple question of right and wrong. Referring to Kingsley but not wanting to use his name, Harry retorted, "He said that you didn't mean it the way it sounded. But right now, it sounds a whole lot like that. I know this isn't going to mean anything to you, but this is just the right thing to do. I mean, it's really obvious, it isn't even close. People are at risk, it's just different people now. If my fighting him was the right thing to do up until now, it's the right thing to do now."

There was a silence; Bright met Harry's gaze, but said nothing. "We may be getting too far ahead of ourselves, in any case," suggested McGonagall, clearly trying to calm things down. "None of this is certain, except that he saw a three-by-three Ring. Did Pettigrew overhear its eventual resting place?"

Harry nodded. "Greenland, was all he heard. It should be easy enough to find, with magic-detection equipment. But, Professor Snape, do you think it's possible that he just neglected to consider that I'd be able to get in?"

"Of course not," said Snape. "He knows you can, and that you will. I do not doubt that he has set up the first eight rooms with the most dangerous possible spells and circumstances that he can think of, and that he is confident that you will not break through them. Otherwise, he would not do this."

"But you think I should go anyway. Why?"

Snape managed to look like he was smiling without actually doing so. “Because he has consistently underestimated you. I believe he has done so again, one last time.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you loved him,” said Ginny angrily.

Snape sighed lightly. “I cannot speak to that. But I do know that the headmaster, who we all agree loved him greatly, would have respected his right to do as he wished. ‘We must all make our own decisions,’ he would have said,” he added wryly, with a glance at McGonagall. Ginny put her head in her hands, which Harry interpreted as an admission of defeat.

“Did you learn anything else of interest from Pettigrew?” asked McGonagall.

“A few things, none of great interest,” replied Snape. “Malfoy was to travel to Greenland with the Dark Lord, and assist him in setting up the Ring. There was a vague reference to plans Malfoy had after that, but nothing clear.

“As for Pettigrew, the thought never occurred to him that the conversation may have been staged for his benefit. He tells himself that he does this because he owes Professor Potter a debt for saving him from Lupin and Black, but it is truly because he expects Professor Potter to value this information enough to intercede with the Ministry to spare his life, allowing him to live out his life without fear of being hunted down one day. In addition, he hopes that Professor Potter will be willing to reverse his Cleansing, as he did mine.”

Ron let out a cross between a grunt and a chuckle. “I hope you don’t do that,” he said to Harry. “Get him pardoned, okay, but make him live out his life Cleansed. That’d be punishment enough, for what he’s done.”

“As much as I agree with the sentiment, Mr. Weasley,” said Snape, “letting him be free but Cleansed is not an option. The temptation to commit acts of violence would be too great.”

“The Ministry will decide what to do with him,” said Bright. “We will take into account the fact that he came here voluntarily, even if it was with selfish

motives. When criminals turn themselves in, it is rarely out of remorse or altruism. Kingsley, I assume you will be putting together an expedition to Greenland tomorrow?”

Kingsley nodded. “With magic sensors, of course. It might take a day or two, but if it’s there, we’ll find it.”

“Then I suggest,” said Bright pointedly, “that we take this one step at a time. Let’s make sure it’s even there before considering the next step. Harry, if you would ask Fawkes to return me, I’d appreciate it. And Kingsley, would you take him into custody?”

“I never thought I’d be taking a rat into custody,” muttered Kingsley.

“Thank you, Harry,” said Bright, as Fawkes hovered above his head. The others left, and it was just the six of them again.

Harry moved the desks and re-conjured the carpet, and they sat down. As they did, Ginny hugged Harry from a sitting position, clinging to him. “Sometimes, I sit there in class, and think, how did I get so lucky to have you for a life partner. And then something like this happens, and I remember the price I pay for it. I knew this, Harry, I knew this when I fell in love with you. You had already been risking yourself in ways that would drive a partner crazy with worry before you fell in love with me. But like I’ve said before, and it’s still true... knowing that doesn’t make it any easier.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I just can’t live with the idea that he’ll come out in two hundred years and terrorize the people then, and I didn’t stop him now when I had the chance. But there is something I’ll promise you.” He broke off the hug and looked into her eyes, his face very close to hers. “You can go out the front entrance of the first room, as well as the last. We’ll always be able to go back, and we’ll always be able to see what’s in the next room. If there’s something we can’t do, we’ll go back. I don’t intend to run into a room if I don’t know how I’m going to get past it.”

“Well, that’s something, at least,” she said. She kissed him, and put her arms around him, resuming the hug. “I do believe in you, you know. I don’t mean I don’t think you can do it. It’s just that... it’s taking all my effort right now not to go on pleading with you not to do it. You know how that is, how it would be if it were me. But Snape is right, and I know it. This is who you are. It’s just so ironic, part of what makes you so attractive is the same thing that feels like it could rip my heart apart—how brave you are, how you always want to do the right thing. I know this isn’t easy for you. It just isn’t easy for me, either.”

“No, it’s harder for you,” said Neville, prompting Hermione to take his hand. “I think Harry knows that.”

“I do,” said Harry, continuing to hold Ginny. “We’ll get through it.”

Two days later, Kingsley contacted Harry to tell him that the Aurors had found the Ring. They couldn’t yet confirm that Voldemort was inside, but they planned to set up some relays, which would tell them within twelve hours. Harry asked why one relay wouldn’t tell them; Kingsley explained that there had to be at least twelve of them in proximity to each other for them to work, which Harry hadn’t known. “Otherwise, we could’ve flown around on brooms with relays, and found him that way,” pointed out Kingsley. Harry hadn’t thought of that, either.

When Harry entered the staff room with Hermione on Thursday, Dentus had a message for him and McGonagall, who was also there. “I got a fireplace call from Bright just now, before lunch. He said to tell you two that he was giving an interview to the Prophet today, and that ‘the whole story’ would be in tomorrow’s Prophet. Of course, I have no idea what he’s talking about, but he said you would.”

Angry, Harry looked at McGonagall. “He’s making it public? Is that really a good idea?”

“I can understand your annoyance, but it is really not a security matter anymore,” she explained. “This is perfectly consistent with his feeling that the matter deserves a public airing. It is simply that, as Minister, he is in a position to

give it one. Letting you know was clearly a matter of courtesy, so you would not feel as though he were doing something underhanded.”

McGonagall explained the situation to the other teachers, who listened raptly. “And you’re going?” asked Sprout fearfully.

“Yes, I am.” To the silence, he added, “Well, I should be able to do this; I am the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, after all.”

“Yes, I’m sure Lockhart would have been able to,” said McGonagall dryly.

“I must say, Harry,” said a concerned Sprout, “your humor usually isn’t quite this... morbid.”

“I do expect to come back, you know,” he said. “I wouldn’t be taking Hermione with me if I didn’t.” He almost added, ‘I would take Professor Snape,’ but decided it wouldn’t be appropriate for the staff room, though he would have said it if they had been alone. He did glance at Snape with a small grin, wondering if Snape would fill in the blank.

“It does not surprise me that the Minister has done this,” said Snape disdainfully. “He is simply covering himself politically.”

Harry glanced at Dentus inquiringly. “Professor Snape’s interpretation of the Minister’s action is perhaps cynical, but probably not wrong,” said Dentus. “If he authorized your doing this without making it known first, he would be responsible for what happened if things went badly. By doing this, he can allow public opinion to form, which he can then react to. If people support the idea, he can do so with little risk. If they oppose it, he’ll probably do so as well.”

“I’m going to do it anyway, whether he approves or not,” said Harry. “I’m pretty sure he knows that.” Harry knew that Snape and Dentus would understand that he was referring to Bright’s Legilimency.

“That may be, but if you do it over his opposition, and you get killed and Voldemort returns, he won’t be blamed,” explained Dentus.

Even though he was somewhat knowledgeable about politics by then, Harry was still a little stunned. “If that happens, we have much bigger problems than who gets blamed.”

“Of course, that’s true,” agreed Dentus. “It’s really a political reflex.”

“Yes, cowardice is a well-known political reflex,” said Snape scornfully.

“Isn’t it possible that it’s what he said, that he just thinks the public deserves to have a say in what happens?” asked Harry. “I didn’t get the sense that he was lying.”

Snape smirked. “Legilimency does not tell you when people are fooling themselves; you must make that determination yourself. I had thought you had lost enough of your naiveté to not ask that question.”

“Apparently not,” said Harry. “I do like him, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” said Snape, his tone making his opinion clear. “Keep in mind, though, that he will always look out for himself first.”

“I guess that would be a political reflex too,” mused Harry. He glanced at Dentus, who nodded. He can do whatever he wants, thought Harry. It doesn’t make any difference to me.

After Hagrid’s Care of Magical Creatures class, Harry sat down with Snape to talk about what specific traps Snape thought he might find. Snape had a few ideas, but admitted that for the most part, Voldemort was likely to highly inventive, and to use artifacts. Snape explained that some artifacts could be incorporated into a Ring, and reminded Harry that Voldemort had, at the time Snape’s spying had been exposed, been in the process of acquiring an artifact that he felt sure would eliminate Harry. Snape was sure that Harry would encounter this artifact, but again, didn’t seem especially worried.

Harry was curious, and asked, “Why are you so sure that nothing’s going to happen to me? I mean... to be honest, even though I say that, I think it’s more because I won’t consider the alternative than because I’m a hundred percent sure. But you seem sure.”

“As I said the other night, it is because of what I have seen in your mind. There is something... different about you. You react instinctively in dangerous situations, and never wrongly. You have survived so much that it is difficult to believe that something will defeat you.”

“But there have been times when I didn’t do it myself,” Harry pointed out. “You’ve saved me before, and the others all have at one time or another, too.”

“And that will be Professor Granger’s job,” said Snape reasonably. “Or, to put it another way, her job will be... to think.”

“As long as someone is. You know, I’m sorry, I know you would have preferred to come along. I would’ve picked you if I couldn’t have her for some reason.”

Snape nodded at the compliment. “Your reason is valid enough. I still feel I would be of more use, but I agree that the chances of my returning are less than hers. That would not disturb me, of course, but it would greatly disturb you, and your mental state is a very important element in this.”

Harry had no particular answer to the comment, and after a short pause, remembered something from Monday night. “When you were arguing with Bright, I saw your hand move to your wand. Were you thinking of attacking him?”

The corner of Snape’s mouth curled up. “The idea would have had a certain appeal, but no. He had tapped me.” To Harry’s puzzled look, Snape explained, “When two people are Legilimens, and each knows that the other is, there is something they do occasionally to exchange information. He used Legilimency to ‘tap’ me, to cause a certain mental sensation.” Snape demonstrated as he spoke, and Harry did indeed feel as if someone were tapping him, in his mind rather than on his shoulder. “It was an offer to show me a memory as we spoke. I touched my wand in order to view the memory. In this case, the memory was information he found when he viewed the memories of some Death Eaters before their executions. There was, for example, Avery’s memory of my returning to the Death Eaters three years ago, and what happened then. This was when he said he knew far more than I

thought; he assumed, correctly, that I did not know that he had viewed the memories of the Death Eaters as he had. I would not have guessed he had the stomach for it. He did not know much of what I have done, but he knew more than I thought. It is still irrelevant, though; he should not be telling you what to do.”

Harry more or less felt the same way, but Bright had touched a nerve with the ‘responsible to no one’ comment. He had never thought of himself as especially responsible to the Ministry, particularly after the vendetta it had waged against him in his fifth year at Hogwarts. He supposed he felt responsible to Dumbledore first, then McGonagall. Did he have a responsibility to the Ministry? He wasn’t sure, and found that he didn’t want to think about it.

Harry arrived for breakfast a little late on Friday. Knowing she would have already read the Prophet, he asked Hermione, “So, how bad is it?”

“It could be worse,” she said. “He doesn’t give an opinion about whether you should go or not. All he says about that is ‘we’re studying it,’ which I’ve learned is politician-speak for ‘I want more information about public opinion before I take a position.’”

“That’s good. After the way he was on Monday night, I was afraid he’d be negative about it, and push public opinion that way,” said Harry.

Surprised, Ron asked, “Since when do you care about public opinion?”

“Good question,” Harry admitted. “I guess I’d feel better about doing it if I knew that people supported it. Maybe I’m used to having public support, and it would be strange not having it. I’m not sure.”

“Just to warn you, Harry, you might not get it, or not nearly as much as you’re used to,” said Hermione. “Everything you’ve done up until now has had the effect of protecting the community, of helping or rallying the community. What we’re going to do doesn’t help this community at all, and causes some amount of risk. You’re now doing it for the community that’s going to exist two hundred years from now, and they don’t have any representatives here. There could be a lot of

people who think, ‘why not leave well enough alone, who knows what’ll happen in two hundred years.’”

“Now you’re making me feel bad for saying that,” said Ginny.

“I wasn’t—”

“I know you weren’t, and I know you’ll say, I have a better reason than anyone to feel that way. But Harry’s right, it’s just wrong to say to those people, too bad, you’re on your own. As it is now, Harry’s going to be the most famous wizard of his generation. Wouldn’t it be ironic if a generation that read about him in history books ended up getting wiped out because he didn’t care enough to take a risk to help them.”

Ron raised his eyebrows. “‘Tragic’ seems more like the right word, but I see what you mean. But I wondered, Harry, couldn’t you just wait to do it? He’s not going anywhere, you could do it forty years from now, and it would be the same as doing it now.”

“I did think of that,” he said, with an uneasy glance at Ginny, who had thought of it as well. “The problem is, theoretically, I could die any time. I know it’s really unlikely, considering what I’ve survived, but you never know. And if I die unexpectedly, that’s that for those future people. But also, I don’t want it hanging over my head for forty years. I want to get it over with.” The explanation had not gone over especially well with Ginny; she could understand it, but had felt it was a very small risk, compared to the certainty of a life together.

“Can I see your paper, Hermione?” Harry asked. She handed it to him, and he scanned the front page. The main article, the one in which the whole situation was explained based on the interview with Bright, was the article at the top of page one. The article that focused on Harry, written by Hugo and based on the interview he had conducted with Harry the day before, was off to one side, starting just above halfway up the front page. Good, he thought, at least they didn’t bury it. Harry wanted people to know why he wanted to do it, since he didn’t expect Bright to touch on the subject much in his interview.

“Are you a lot calmer about this whole thing,” Neville asked Ginny, “or am I just imagining it?”

Ginny nodded. “Don’t get me wrong, I’d try to talk him out of it if I could. I’m still selfish enough to not want him to do it. But I’ve accepted that I can’t talk him out of it, that like I said, this is just who he is. So, I’ve decided to join him in his state of denial about the danger. He’s convinced that nothing’s going to happen to him, so I’ll be convinced too. I don’t know if I could get by otherwise.”

“Whatever works,” Neville half-joked. “I can definitely understand it.”

Harry still didn’t feel that it was denial, so much as a reasonable expectation based on his experience. He didn’t see the point of entertaining other possibilities.

* * * * *

“WHAT ABOUT THE PEOPLE TWO HUNDRED YEARS FROM NOW?”

Public Opinion Divided On Question Of Potter’s Final Confrontation With Voldemort

(Hogwarts/April 22) Hugo Brantell, Daily Prophet

Three weeks after the Ring of Reduction containing the evil Dark wizard Voldemort was located in Greenland by Aurors, public opinion is still very divided on the question of whether Hogwarts professor Harry Potter should be given permission to enter the Ring in an effort to defeat Voldemort once and for all.

As Prophet readers know, Professor Potter strongly wishes to enter the Ring, accompanied by friend and fellow Hogwarts professor Hermione Granger. The most controversial aspect of his motivation is a prophecy given seventeen years ago which states that a certain person, understood now to refer to Professor Potter, would be ‘the one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord,’ suggesting that Professor Potter alone is capable of doing so. Supporting the idea is the fact that Voldemort is known to be highly vulnerable to the Imperius Charm, which to this date can only be performed by Professor Potter.

Those who oppose the idea point out that Voldemort is safely out of the way, and will likely remain so for a very long time if the Ring is undisturbed. They fear that if Professor Potter attempts to capture Voldemort and fails, Voldemort could return earlier than planned, threatening the lives of the population in a way that will not occur if Professor Potter does not make the attempt.

At the center of the debate is a question which is very much a matter of judgment, and cannot be decided objectively: what risks are we willing to take for the sake of future generations? Clearly, Professors Potter and Granger are the ones most at risk; it is agreed by experts that Voldemort will have set up highly dangerous obstacles for Professor Potter, which even the energy of love may not be able to defeat. But, of course, the two professors would not be the only ones at risk.

The man who will ultimately make the decision, Minister of Magic Rudolphus Bright, has been guarded in his public comments on the matter. (He declined a request for an interview for this article.) Ministry sources familiar with Bright's thinking say that he is genuinely conflicted; they say he has great confidence in and regard for Professor Potter, but is very concerned about the risk to the population should he and Professor Granger fail.

Professor Potter, on the other hand, is anything but conflicted; he is utterly certain that there is no alternative but to make the attempt. He firmly believes that the prophecy is correct, and that his not making the attempt is tantamount to abandoning the citizens two hundred years from now to the same fate which he has been attempting to prevent befalling the citizens of the present day. He recognizes the potential danger to the current population, but feels it is a risk worth taking.

Ministry of Magic Undersecretary Roger Trent, the only high-ranking Ministry official to speak publicly against Professor Potter's plans, feels that Professor Potter is being too 'cavalier' in dismissing the danger to the population. "He has taken staggering risks on behalf of the wizarding population, which we recognize and appreciate," said Trent recently, in an interview conducted through an intermediary. "But I fear he has taken this to the level of a personal vendetta. Voldemort killed

his parents, and others close to him. It must seem to him that Voldemort has slipped away unpunished, and I very much understand why he will stop at nothing to gain revenge. But simply because he is willing to take substantial risks does not mean that he should subject the population involuntarily to those risks. If he has done what he has done for the people, then he and the Minister should listen to those people now. If he has done it for the reasons I fear he has, he should stop and seriously reflect on the possible consequences of his actions.”

Trent dismissed the idea that leaving Voldemort where he is could condemn a generation to a difficult struggle and likely defeat. “Two hundred years gives us plenty of time to prepare,” said Trent. “Already, over a dozen Hogwarts students have the ability to use the Killing Curse shield; I strongly suspect it will be commonplace in two hundred years. Further advancements in magic may be made by that time, and we can pass down detailed information to future generations, so they can be ready. We may even find a way to destroy or transport the Ring; there are all kinds of possibilities. In his desire for retribution, Harry wants to rush ahead along the riskiest path. I am confident that Minister Bright will have the proper perspective, and act prudently.”

In an interview for this article, Professor Granger vigorously denied that Professor Potter’s motivation was revenge. “That’s ridiculous, as anyone who knows Harry well would understand. He just doesn’t work that way. In any case, he wouldn’t be able to use the energy of love if he were motivated by revenge; if you asked any of the people Harry’s successfully taught, they would tell you the same thing. As for being prepared in the future, that would be nice, and I would hope they would be. But if I’ve learned anything from my History of Magic classes, it’s that political leaders are far more responsive to political opportunism than to the lessons of history. I find it very likely that in two hundred years, Voldemort would be little more than a legend, and warnings handed down from this time would not be taken seriously. More importantly, it would be morally wrong to pass a burden to future generations that we could take care of now, that we have the best chance of dealing with now. Undersecretary Trent is trying to appeal to people’s selfish impulses; Harry and I hope that this

generation will take the security of their grandchildren's grandchildren as seriously as they take their own."

Interviews with random citizens suggest that most have not deeply thought through the arguments for either side. Those who oppose Professor Potter's plans make various arguments against them, but are largely motivated by fear of Voldemort, and a feeling of 'we should leave well enough alone.' Those who support the action Professor Potter wishes to take do so mostly based on their trust in him; a very representative attitude was voiced by a woman who said, "Look what he's accomplished, think of where we'd be without him. He's earned our trust, and should do what he thinks is best."

The Ministry has given no timetable regarding when a decision on the matter might be forthcoming. Professor Potter is known to wish to make the attempt as soon as possible, but as a Ministry source recently said, "[The Ministry is] in no hurry to make any kind of decision. Without any sense of urgency pressing against them, they'll put it off for years if they can, I suspect. Politicians hate to take risks, and no matter what regard one may have for Professor Potter, this would undeniably be a risk." The wizarding population must now decide whether they agree with Professor Potter that it is a risk worth taking.

* * * * *

The following Saturday, Harry walked out of the castle entrance with the other six members of the Quidditch team for their second match of the season, against Slytherin. Glancing at the rest of the team as they walked, it occurred to Harry for the first time as a conscious thought that aside from him, the team consisted of three brother-sister combinations: two Weasleys, two Creeveys, and two Keplers. Funny how I never noticed that before, Harry thought. Snape would get a chuckle out of it, that I'm not very observant.

"So, Ron," said Dennis, "can you tell me what position I'll be playing today? Beater, maybe?" Harry grinned at Dennis's humorous way of complaining about

being made to play Keeper in the last match, having had almost no experience at the position.

“Actually, I was going to tell you this in the changing room, but since you asked now, I might as well tell you,” said Ron earnestly. “We’re going to do this thing where, to keep the opposition off balance, we change positions every fifteen minutes. I’ve got it all written down. You’ll start out at Seeker, then go to Chaser... hang on, let me get the timetable, I have it all worked out...” Harry and Ginny laughed as Ron pretended to search the pockets of his robes.

“Don’t do that again, Dennis,” said a relieved-looking Eric. “I thought he was serious.” Eric’s older sister Lydia joined Harry and Ginny in their laughter.

Grinning now, Ron said, “Well, if I thought it would help...”

“I feel like I should practice at all positions, just in case,” said Dennis. Ron had announced at the last practice that the starting lineups would be the same as last time, but Harry and Andrea would switch positions if Gryffindor got out to a big lead, or if Ron determined that he and Ginny scored enough on the Firebolts that Harry could be spared to Seek. Harry didn’t assume that would happen, though, considering that Slytherin’s brooms were excellent, though they weren’t Firebolts. Gryffindor’s broom advantage would be nowhere near as pronounced as it had been against Ravenclaw.

They changed and walked out to the stadium. Ravenclaw would play Hufflepuff first, so the Gryffindors would be on the sidelines, watching the match. For the first time in over a year, there would be no Auror patrol over the stadium; with the Death Eaters decimated and Voldemort in a Ring of Reduction, there was little reason to think that security would be a problem.

Standing on Harry’s left, Ginny leaned toward Harry and spoke quietly, so only he could hear. “I kind of feel bad for the Slytherins,” she said with amusement. “They have to play against their idol.”

Not wanting to disappoint her, he frowned at her choice of words. “They did promise me they’d do their best,” he said, recalling that he’d been surprised to discover that they were so intimidated at the thought of playing against him.

“I’m sure they will,” she said, as Madam Hooch blew the whistle to start the match. “Anyway, it should be interesting to see how Michael does today. He’s not up against three Firebolts, so he won’t have an excuse if he does poorly today.”

Remembering that Hufflepuff had a strong offense last year, and that none of their Chasers had graduated, Harry felt that Corner would have his hands full anyway, and he was right. Thirty minutes into the match, Hufflepuff got the Snitch and the victory, by a score of two hundred ninety to one hundred thirty. Corner didn’t look like a good Keeper, thought Harry, but at least he didn’t look totally outclassed as he had in the first match.

After the Star of the Match interview, Harry and his teammates walked onto the pitch. Some of the Slytherins nodded at him; a few were looking in other directions. Harry wondered if they’d be intimidated by Ron, too, since Ron had worked with all of them on their flying. Speaking quietly, Harry said to Ron, “At least, this’ll be the first time we’ve played Slytherin where we don’t have to worry about them doing something underhanded.” Ron chuckled and nodded in agreement.

“Captains, shake hands,” said Madam Hooch, and Ron and Hedrick exchanged a friendly handshake. She blew the whistle, and the players shot off the ground.

“And they’re off, Ginny grabs the Quaffle and heads at top speed to the Slytherin hoops,” announced Colin, speaking quickly. “Septus is ready, Ginny sh—no, fakes! Septus goes for the fake just for a half-second, but it’s enough, and Ginny shoots past him for the goal, as Gryffindor takes the early lead. Slytherin with the Quaffle, Flatt passes out to Danforth, back to Flatt, who speeds ahead, Ron on him. Flatt continues on into the scoring area, shoots and misses! I don’t know whether

Dennis would have been able to reach it if it had been good, but it was just wide of the left hoop.

“Dennis passes out to Potter, who passes downfield to Ron as Lydia bats away a Clark Bludger. Ron to Ginny, Flatt covering Ginny, passes to Ron, who shoots, saved by Septus! Nice save there, as Septus passes out to Cook. Cook sends it ahead to Flatt, who speeds ahead, spots a Potter steal attempt at the last second and swerves away, but doesn’t see Ginny coming from the other side! She bats it out of his hands, scooped up by Potter, as all three Gryffindor Chasers fly down the pitch, ahead of their Slytherin counterparts.”

Harry sped past midfield, thinking about whether he would take the shot himself or pass off to Ron or Ginny. They had decided not to do the blind passing this time, as Slytherin’s brooms were not that far in speed from a Firebolt, so they couldn’t take it for granted that the target of the pass would always be open. He looked behind him, but didn’t see Ron, and Ginny wasn’t in a good position to be passed to. Deciding to take the shot himself, he turned his head to look ahead again, just in time to see the Bludger approaching his head at high speed.

Harry slowly opened his eyes, and saw Ginny and a woman in green robes walking toward him; he realized after a second that it was Healer Haspberg. As he glanced around the room, he realized that he was in a private recovery room at St. Mungo’s, and that he had a splitting headache. Ginny took his left hand and kissed the back of it. “Oh, thank goodness,” she said fervently. “They thought you’d be okay, but I wasn’t assuming anything until you woke up. How do you feel?”

“I have an awful headache,” he said, as he started to remember how he’d ended up there. “Funny, when I realized where I was, the first thing I thought was, Voldemort again? It’s such a reflex, if something happened to me.”

“I can understand that, but you’d better not say that to Helen,” advised Ginny. “She’s just been beside herself, she was terrified that she’d killed you, or permanently injured you. She was just bawling, she was apologizing to me. I’ve been

really worried too, of course, but I didn't want her to feel like that. I told her that if Voldemort hasn't managed to kill you, a Bludger isn't going to do it."

"It almost did," said Haspberg, her expression grave. "It hit you in the forehead... well, you can see it," she added, handing him a hand mirror; he held it up to see a large bump on the left side of his forehead, a half-inch below where his hair started. "You didn't get the full impact. If it had hit you in the center of the forehead, you could very easily have died. That has happened in Quidditch before."

Harry raised his eyebrows at how close it had been. "You should send to Hermione that you're okay, she can start telling people," suggested Ginny. "Everyone's really worried."

"She already knows," said Harry, getting an impression from Hermione as he spoke. "She asked Flora to let her know as soon as I woke up. She's in the Great Hall with a bunch of people; she just sent me an image of it." He asked her nonverbally if Helen was in the Hall, and got back a negative answer. Harry made a request of Fawkes, who appeared in a few seconds, Helen in tow.

"Professor!" Helen nearly screamed, and rushed to his bedside. With only a little difficulty, Harry sat up and put his arms around her. She started to sob into his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry..."

Harry shook his head and patted her back. "No, it was my fault," he said, feeling bad for her suffering. "I wasn't looking well enough. I don't have much experience at Chaser—no, it's true," he added, as she shook her head as she cried. "You have to look out for Bludgers, know where the Beaters are and what they're doing. I've heard that a lot of Chasers have to get clobbered at least once for that to really sink in. As a Seeker, I was usually far enough from the main action that I didn't have to worry about it so much. And Ravenclaw's Beaters weren't very good, so I didn't think about it much last time. But it's not your fault. You did what you were supposed to do. The whole point is to make Chasers hesitate when approaching the hoops."

Helen had stopped crying, and was now sniffing. "I was trying to miss, I really was," she said, obviously desperate for Harry to believe her, though it would never have occurred to him that she would try to hit him in the head. "I was nervous about the match because I knew I'd have to hit Bludgers at you, and I didn't want to. This is like, the worst thing that could have happened."

"I'm sorry," he said again, holding her a little more tightly. "It really wasn't your fault, it really wasn't. And I'm going to be all right."

Helen let go of Harry and turned to Healer Haspberg, looking for confirmation. Haspberg nodded. "We'll do some tests to make sure, but it looks that way. We'll have him do some spells as a test, to help us make sure." She turned and left the room.

Having a sudden idea about doing his own test, Harry reflected that Hermione wouldn't approve, but quickly decided he didn't care. He reached for his wand and cast the Imperius Charm on Helen, giving her no instructions, but reinforcing the idea that it wasn't her fault, that sometimes things just happened.

Helen's face lit up. "Oh, wow... this is amazing!"

"So I hear," said Harry wryly. "I suppose if I can do that, I must be all right. I'm going to withdraw the spell now, okay?"

"Just a little bit longer?" she asked, still looking blissfully happy.

I'm beginning to see why Hermione said I shouldn't do this for people's enjoyment, thought Harry. "Okay, just another half minute," he conceded, still feeling bad for her. Turning to Ginny, he asked, "Why am I here, by the way? Why not the infirmary?"

"Ron and I both dove for you, and Ron got to you first, and levitated you," Ginny explained. "Then he held you over his shoulder, and Fawkes appeared. Ron grabbed his tail, and expected to be taken to the infirmary, but Fawkes took you here instead. Seems like a good idea, to go to the place with the best facilities."

"Well, phoenixes know best," said Harry, only half-joking. "Okay, Helen, I really need to stop that now, all right?"

“Okay,” she conceded, with obvious regret. Harry withdrew the spell, and Helen shook her head in amazement. “That was so incredible. I know what Hermione said about not doing it for fun, and I guess she’s right. I would’ve had you do that for an hour, or longer, if you’d agreed. I guess the only reason you did it at all was that I felt so bad.”

“You don’t feel bad anymore?” asked Ginny.

“No, I still do, but that really distracted me,” said Helen. “It’s also that he’s going to be okay, of course. But if I think about it, I feel bad again.”

“Then stop thinking about it,” said Harry, with a tone that humorously suggested that he was speaking as a teacher. “I was serious, it really was my fault. What happened with the match, by the way?”

Helen and Ginny exchanged a look of mild annoyance that such a thing could be considered. “We weren’t exactly thinking about that,” responded Ginny. “Madam Hooch tried to tell us to play on after Ron came back, which was a few minutes after he took you. Everyone was asking Ron about how you were doing, but he didn’t know; they didn’t tell him anything right away, they probably didn’t know. We were all still really worried, so playing was really out of the question.”

“I was crying so much, I couldn’t have played even if I’d wanted to, even if they started the match again,” added Helen. Feeling bad for her again, Harry reached over and put an arm around her shoulders.

“Anyway,” continued Ginny, “Ron and Hedrick talked, and agreed that there was no way we were going to continue the match. They walked over to Madam Hooch and told her that they weren’t going to continue, and whatever happened from that point was up to her. Then Colin asked Ron to fly over to where he was, obviously not for the Star of the Match interview, but just to tell people what he knew. He told them what they told him at St. Mungo’s, and that because of the phoenixes, Hermione would be the first one to know anything. So, Hermione’s had a crowd around her ever since then.”

Harry nodded, lost in thought. After a short silence, he said, “I just had... a strange thought, but it really made sense. I feel like this was a message from... fate, or whatever, that I need to get into the Ring and get that over with, not let Bright or whoever else put me off anymore.”

Reluctantly, Ginny nodded. “I couldn’t help but remember that argument we had the day after Pettigrew came back, when I tried to get you to put it off for thirty or forty years. This just shows that you were right. You could’ve been killed, and then those people in the future would’ve been in trouble.”

“I thought of that too,” added Helen, holding onto Harry a little more tightly. “Just you getting killed would be horrible, but thinking about that, too... it was so awful, I’m just so glad you’re all right...”

“I’m all right,” he assured her. It may have been close, he added silently, but I’m all right.

Harry walked into Dentus’s quarters shortly after breakfast the next morning. “How are you feeling?” asked Dentus. “I’m sorry, I know you must be getting asked that by every person you haven’t seen since the match, but still...”

“Not that bad,” answered Harry as they sat. “Healer Haspberg wanted me to spend the night at St. Mungo’s, but really, when you get down to it, it’s just a bump on the head.”

“Most bumps don’t knock people unconscious,” pointed out Dentus. “But I know you’ll tend to understate such things, so when you say ‘bump,’ I understand you mean ‘concussion.’ By the way, how was the match decided?”

Harry rolled his eyes briefly in annoyance at Madam Hooch. “She called it a Gryffindor win, by the score of ten to nothing, which was the score when I got hit. Apparently there’s no provision in the rules for what happens if both teams simultaneously decide not to play any more, so she used the rule for what happens if the stadium is destroyed in some natural disaster, which is the closest thing she could find. It just seems to me to be common sense to reschedule the match, but

she says once it's started, there has to be some result. I really don't like winning like that, though."

"Understandable," agreed Dentus. "So, what did you want to talk about? Not that you have to have a reason to come here."

Harry nodded. "I guess most of the time I can say what I want in the staff room. I'm getting sick of waiting, Archibald. I want to get the Ring over with. You knew that already, of course, but what happened yesterday..."

"Seemed to give it a new sense of urgency, I would imagine," agreed Dentus. "I can very much understand that. Unfortunately, what happened yesterday doesn't change the political situation."

"I know. By the way, I meant to ask you in the staff room, but I never did... what's going on with this guy Trent? I'd never heard of him before. What's with all that crap about revenge? Who does he think he is, acting like he knows what I'm thinking?"

"He doesn't, of course," said Dentus. "I'm sure I told you a long time ago that in politics, how something looks is often more important than how it is. To someone who doesn't know you, but knows your history, revenge would seem like a very understandable motive for your actions. That's what Trent is playing on. I've explained this sort of political act before: when politicians want to make a case, they put it together in such a way that it appears that it is, or could be, true. Whether it actually is true is irrelevant from their point of view; all they care about is that it can't be directly disproved. What Hermione said in the article was as an effective a refutation as could be given, but he would just say, 'she's his friend, what do you expect her to say?' Anyone who knows you knows that she's right, but he's speaking to those who don't know you, and are nervous about their safety."

"Now, the next question is, why is he doing this," continued Dentus, as Harry nodded. "It's another kind of political game, the kind that gives politicians a bad name. He sees an opportunity; there's a position that no one has staked out, so he is. His game is: suppose you go into the Ring, with Bright's permission, and fail."

You die, and Voldemort comes back. Having been the only one to have prominently opposed it, people will remember that he was right. That wouldn't make him Minister, by any stretch, though it would increase his influence. But if Bright started taking on water politically for whatever reason—which, of course, Trent would be doing everything possible to assist—Trent could become the logical alternative. Of course, as you've said before, if you fail there are much bigger things to worry about. But it would take a long time for Voldemort to recruit enough to become a true threat again, and Trent would be aiming to be Minister before then.

“There is a risk to him in this: if you defeat Voldemort, Bright having given you permission, then Bright is golden, and Trent's ambitions are dashed, probably for the next ten years at least. But he figures that since in that situation Bright is golden anyway, so if he's damaged a little, it's not so important. No one would be taking the position from Bright for a long time. Also, he can just say that he was being prudent, looking out for people's interests. The key for Trent in this is that since you'd be going into the Ring to save future people—people who have no constituency now—there's no one to punish him politically for disregarding their interests. That's what gives his current position such little risk. If he's wrong, people will forget it fairly quickly. But if Bright's wrong, people will remember it. So, all in all: relatively low risk for Trent, relatively high return if he's right. The only unknown is what the likelihood of your succeeding is.”

Harry was silent for a half a minute, letting it all roll around in his mind; he knew that without Dentus's tutoring over the past year, he wouldn't have even understood what Dentus had just said. Still... Finally, he shook his head, and said, “Archibald, do you mind if I use your bathroom? I really feel like I need to throw up.”

Dentus nodded understandingly. “I know what you mean. Even for politics, this is pretty craven. Hugo understood this, of course, which is why he wrote the article the way he did.”

“What do you mean, ‘the way he did?’” wondered Harry.

“I told you last summer that politicians don’t want to be interviewed by Hugo, because he’ll see their agenda, and make it clear by the way he writes. Hugo made a special point of noting that Trent only agreed to be interviewed ‘through an intermediary,’ that is, so Hugo couldn’t use his ability. By noting that—which Hugo is ethically well within his rights to do—Hugo is basically making it clear that Trent has something he wants to hide. Now, Trent could have done what Bright did, and just declined comment altogether, but he wanted his point of view in that article, so he did it that way. Another way Hugo made his point was that he let Hermione rebut what Trent said about you, and didn’t give Trent a chance to rebut her. Now, someone always has to get the last word; that’s unavoidable. By giving it to Hermione, Hugo was making a subtle point. So, if you read between the lines of Hugo’s article, he’s basically saying the same thing I just explained to you, that Trent is playing a game. Not that many people will understand it properly, of course.”

“So, Trent didn’t really gain anything by not speaking to Hugo directly, did he?” asked Harry.

“Not really, no.”

Despite all he had learned from Dentus, Harry was still incredulous. “So, Hermione and I are going to risk our lives to get rid of Voldemort, and this guy’s been spending his time working out a way that he can benefit from it if we die.” Dentus nodded. “Well, this says something about how much I’ve learned from you. Last year, I would’ve been outraged by this. Now, I’m just disgusted.”

“Whereas I, on the other hand, am utterly unsurprised,” said Dentus. “If I’m surprised by anything, it’s that no one took this position until now. That it took this long, I feel, is an indication of the regard in which you’re held in the Ministry, and of your popular support—you haven’t been wrong yet, and nobody wants to get on the wrong side of you. People do think you have at least a decent chance of success, since you’ve done so much already. Many politicians, including Trent, have little or no shame, but I think that many would be ashamed to do what Trent’s done. So, that’s something.”

“You mean, no one wants to make an enemy of me?” asked Harry.

Dentus nodded. “If you succeed, you could do a lot to hurt the career of any politician who opposed you, Trent included.”

“When we succeed, the last thing I’m going to do is start sticking daggers in politicians’ backs, or having someone do it for me,” Harry said emphatically. “I wouldn’t lower myself to do that.”

“I know that, of course,” agreed Dentus. “But the politicians don’t, and I’m not going to go announcing it. I’d rather they at least considered the possibility. In fact—and I hope it won’t bother you that I’ve done this, but I didn’t think you’d care—I’ve very subtly let it be known to a few people, who I know will spread the word, that I had something to do with keeping Umbridge out of action. Knowing our relationship, people will assume that it was on your behalf, even if I didn’t have your direct consent; they’ll assume that I’ll do things on your behalf that you might not specifically authorize.”

Harry grunted. “Normally, I might be bothered at that idea, but after what you just told me, I’m not sure I care. Just do what you think is best.” After a short pause, he added, “Just don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Dentus looked at Harry quizzically. “Harry, the whole point of this is that—” Dentus cut himself off as Harry gave him a small grin. Dentus returned the grin as he said, “Ah, you were kidding. That was very good, it was the first time I couldn’t tell.”

“It’s like the first time Neville kidded Ron and I; we weren’t expecting it.” Harry paused, then sighed. “This is really depressing. I can only imagine where I’d be without your help. Anyway, the main thing I wanted to talk to you about is getting into that Ring, ideally with Bright’s blessing, sometime before my hair starts to turn gray. Think there’s any chance of that?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it,” mused Dentus. “I think that Hugo’s article is right, of course, that Bright would put you off as long as it isn’t a matter of urgency. The only thing you can do, really, is make it one. I assume, from having

heard you talk about this, that you plan on going whether you have permission or not?”

Harry nodded. “I can do it pretty easily, of course. I could use the Imperius Charm on Aurors to help me, but as Neville has pointed out, some would probably risk their careers to help me voluntarily. They think I should be allowed to go. It’s funny: part of me wants to ask people like you what they think of my going without permission, but part of me won’t, because I’m so sure that it’s the right thing to do. I know it seems bad, but I just can’t live with not doing anything.

“By the way, I talked with Kingsley last night, and he gave me permission to tell you about a security matter that very few people know about, since it could have some connection to the delay in Bright’s decision.” He went on to explain the situation regarding the relays to a fascinated Dentus. “So, Kingsley tells me that almost all populated areas are covered by now,” concluded Harry. “If I pushed Bright, he’d probably say that while he can’t say it publicly, any decision should wait until the country is completely covered. Kingsley thinks that’s just an excuse, though, since Voldemort would probably keep a very low profile if I got killed and he got out; there’d be plenty of time to finish covering the country with relays. So, the immediate risk to England if I fail isn’t as bad as the public thinks it is, since we don’t want to make the relays public even though Voldemort knows about them. Anyway, what do you think I can do to get Bright to make a decision?”

Dentus thought for a minute. “If what you plan on doing was popular, you’d have leverage. Of course, if it was popular, he’d have agreed already. Unfortunately, the only way I can think of to force a decision from him is to let him know that you’ll do it anyway. He may have worked that out for himself anyway, but your making it clear will put him on the spot. He could then support you, oppose you, take no action, or publicly oppose you or make no decision but covertly support you. You would, in any case, get your answer. Naturally, you would have to be ready to follow through if he opposed you, which I gather you would do. This is

probably the best thing for you to do, if waiting indefinitely is unacceptable to you, which I sense it is.”

Harry nodded again. “If I force him to make a decision, what decision do you think he’ll make?”

“I’m just not sure,” replied Dentus. “If I were advising him politically, I’d tell him to continue to make no decision, but to covertly provide you support. That’s the safe thing to do. But you can make an excellent political case for him supporting you. As I said while explaining the Trent situation, if he agrees and you succeed, he’ll benefit a lot politically—not so much for saving the future people, ironically, but from the association with you that it’ll bring.

“One other thing, Harry... I’d strongly suggest that I be the one to talk to him about this. What you’re doing is basically leaning on him, pressuring him to do something he doesn’t want to do. I’m referring to making the decision, not necessarily supporting your going into the Ring. It’s better if the one who talks to him is someone he can relate to politically, who truly understands the political aspects of what you’re asking of him.”

“If you think that’s best,” agreed Harry. “He’d probably know I was ticked off at him anyway.” To Dentus’s inquiring glance, Harry explained, “This waiting hasn’t been easy, especially for Neville and Ginny. I see it in Ginny’s eyes sometimes, like she’s afraid she hasn’t got much more time left with me. I want it to be over for her sake more than mine. It’s been a month; he doesn’t need that long to decide. He might claim it’s because of the relays, but I wouldn’t believe him. I just don’t think he’s stopped to think about what it’s like for us.”

“If he had, he probably would have at least made a gesture to that effect,” agreed Dentus. “Now, there’s the question of whether or not he should be given a deadline. I’ll get a sense from him of how long he plans to take, but I’d like to know from you how long a wait from this point on you’d consider acceptable.”

Harry thought for a minute. “He shouldn’t need more than a day or two; it’s not like he hasn’t had a chance to think about it. But I’ll give him two weeks; the

relays should be done well before that. You can be a little flexible, but really, it's been too long already."

"I understand," said Dentus. "I won't state a deadline unless I have to; it depends on how accommodating he is. Lastly, exactly how much do you want his support?"

"What I want is the ability to have support when we go in," explained Harry. "I want my friends there, I want Kingsley to be able to give me advice and help without having to break the law to do it. You said Bright could openly support me, or quietly let me do it. If I can have what I want, I don't care whether he publicly supports me or not."

Dentus nodded, as if it had been the answer he expected. "All right, then. I'll make an appointment to talk to him, and let you know when it's done." Harry thanked him and left. One of these days I'm going to have to do this sort of thing myself, thought Harry, dreading the notion.

A week later, on a Sunday evening, Harry motioned Bright to a seat in his quarters. He felt he should make some small talk just to be sociable, but he didn't really know what to say. He decided to just say what he was thinking. "I assume Archibald told you that I'm not happy about waiting as long as I have."

"He did," acknowledged Bright. "But he knows as well as I do that decisions that can radically affect a society's security often take longer than a month to make. People need time to mull it over, get used to the idea. He explained why you're impatient, and I do understand. But I think you don't understand that this isn't a small matter for the rest of us, even though we're not the ones risking our lives to do it."

"It may not be a small matter, but the thing to do is pretty obvious," countered Harry.

"Did you ever seriously think about not doing it?" asked Bright; Harry shook his head. "The fact that you wouldn't even consider not doing it, despite the

dangers it presents to the people in the here and now, suggests that this isn't exactly a fully rational decision," said Bright. "Now, I don't believe what Trent said for a minute, but can you be sure that it isn't motivated by... not revenge, but a sense of destiny or mission, something like that?"

Harry thought for a bit. "Can anyone be sure of that? I mean, I don't sit around thinking that it's my mission to get him. It's really just something I know, even if I couldn't say why exactly. I know it's not revenge; about the other things, I don't know. But there's something I do remember: if there are two reasons to do a thing, and one is good and one is bad..."

"You mean, your motivations don't matter, that this should just be judged on the merits. Maybe. But one thing that does trouble me about this is the fact that you'll do this even if I explicitly forbid it and attempt to stop you. I know there's no specific law that prevents you from going to Greenland and doing whatever you want, but there are laws that say that the Minister's word is law when it comes to important security matters. Do you really think that you're above the law?"

Harry didn't like it being put that way, which he was sure Bright knew. "I have to admit that I don't have a lot of respect for the law, because I've seen it abused so much since I came to Hogwarts. Fudge threw an innocent Hagrid into Azkaban with no evidence, probably on the authority of the law you just mentioned. But no, I don't think I'm above the law. I can see the reason for the law, and it makes sense, so I should follow it. But in this case, I just couldn't. Those people two hundred years from now... that would weigh on me, every day of my life. Especially after that Bludger, it's more obvious than ever. Even if you forbade it and I didn't do it for that reason, I would still feel that I should have stopped what would happen, that I was responsible for it. Maybe that's obsession, or destiny, I don't know. All I know is it's what I feel. I'm the only one that can stop him, and I have to do it."

“I didn’t say obsession,” clarified Bright. “I don’t think you have an obsession. I do think Snape has an obsession, not to mention a total contempt for the law.”

“It’s understandable—”

“I know, but he suffered from a handicap that was self-inflicted. I’m not inclined to give him credit for overcoming what he chose himself. But to get back to the issue... I do think respect for the law is important. Part of the reason that occurs to me now is that a few days after Pettigrew came back, I asked Kingsley for his reassurance that if I decided to forbid you from doing this, that he and the Aurors wouldn’t help you, and would try to stop you if I asked them to. He said he and they would do as I asked.” Bright paused, then continued. “It was the first time he ever lied to me.”

Harry was gratified, but he could understand why it upset Bright. “He respects you, Rudolphus.”

Bright gave Harry a small nod that suggested that he wasn’t reassured. “Maybe, but he respects you more than he does me. It’s understandable, and very... human. He would disobey me with regret, not contempt, but on a basic level he agrees with Snape, that the ones who fight hardest and risk the most are the ones who deserve the right to make the decisions. I’m sure you know that the law doesn’t apply to Aurors in the same way it does to everyone else, but defying the Minister would be a career-ender. That’s how much he respects you. It wouldn’t be to save the people two hundred years from now, it would be for you.”

“And what do you think, about the people two hundred years from now?” asked Harry, his tone a challenge. “Is it like, ‘I’m the Minister of the current people, I can’t think about those people?’”

Bright sighed in displeasure. “That’s a... vast exaggeration, but I suppose I haven’t given you a great deal of reason to think that wouldn’t be the case. Of course I think about them, but it is true that I consider my primary responsibility to be to the current citizens. I think it’s reasonable that if these people now are being

asked to take a risk, that they have a voice in it. And it's a big risk, Harry. Voldemort is in a box—"

"Only because I put him there!" Harry retorted, raising his voice a little.

Bright regarded him calmly for a few seconds, as if waiting to see if Harry's small burst of temper was over. "Yes, that's right. So it seems you agree with Kingsley and Snape that because you did that, you get to decide this. He can't hurt anybody now, but you're saying, let's go double or nothing. It is a lot like gambling, but it's everyone's futures you're gambling with."

Harry tried to calm down. "If we accept that the prophecy is right that I'm the only one that can beat him, and that he will come out in two hundred years, isn't it a bigger risk to do nothing now? I mean, let's say I have a fifty-fifty chance of succeeding. Isn't a fifty-fifty chance now better than a zero percent chance then?"

"Asking people to take risks on behalf of others is a tricky business," said Bright. "You take those risks, but I feel that it's the kind of thing you should have to volunteer for, not have it demanded of you. Maybe Snape is right, maybe you should have a bigger say in it because of what you've done. There's no right or wrong to this. You say this is the right thing to do. Maybe it is, but I have to say, it's not quite that clear to me, even if I don't think about it politically."

"And," said Harry again, "what about the people two hundred years from now?"

Bright nodded, finally answering the question. "If the prophecy is right, they're in serious trouble, maybe done for. I don't dispute that. But he's chosen to fight you on his terms. He has the upper hand."

Harry wasn't even sure why at first, but he smiled. Bright lifted an eyebrow as Harry said, "No, he doesn't. Did you wonder, Rudolphus, why he didn't just kill Pettigrew and go off to Greenland without making sure I knew where to find him? He could have just come out in two hundred years, and we'd have never known where he was. He wouldn't have had to worry about me. Why did he make sure I found out?"

Bright understood. "Because he had to beat you."

Harry nodded. "His ego demands it, he can't deal with it otherwise. This is his best shot at beating me, but he shouldn't even try at all. Two hundred years from now should be no different than now, to him. He has to beat me, that's his weakness. He'll do the best he can, but he has no escape now. If I get to the ninth room, he's trapped, it's over. He obviously doesn't think I can do it, but like Professor Snape said, he's constantly underestimated me. I'm sure he's done it again."

"And what makes you so sure?" pressed Bright.

"Partly just a feeling, partly the prophecy... but mostly, I've come up with something every time I've had to. I have no idea how or why it happens, but it has, every time. That and the energy of love have to be the reasons for the prophecy. That's what'll get me through this."

Bright stared at him with concern. "Harry, thinking you're charmed could be a dangerous business."

Harry stared back calmly. "So was fighting Voldemort."

"Hard to argue with that," Bright muttered. "Well, we could discuss this all day, but there wouldn't be much of a point. I came to let you know that I've decided to give you official permission and publicly support you."

Harry's eyebrows went high; he had expected nothing more than quiet support. "What made you decide to do that?"

"I'm not sure," admitted Bright. "Part of it is what you've done, but when you get right down to it, I believe the prophecies. And going by the prophecies, this is what you were meant to do. My gut feeling is that you're going to succeed."

Harry slowly nodded. "So, politics didn't enter into it?" he asked with a small smile.

Bright smiled in response. "Politics enters into everything, but I know what you mean. But yes, politics affected this much less than most decisions. And though I want you to succeed for all the right reasons, I wouldn't mind seeing Trent taken

down a few pegs. Ironically, this is where I benefit by being Minister: I'm not taking nearly as big a chance as he thinks I am, because he doesn't know about the relays. It's still a risk, of course—Voldemort could come up with a solution—just less than it otherwise might be.

“Anyway, it'll be announced in the Prophet sometime this week, and you'll get to go soon after that. You'll hear about it from Kingsley. Obviously, you'll have whatever resources from the Ministry you want, which I'll soon be telling Kingsley as well.” He stood, as did Harry. “Good luck,” he said simply.

“Thanks,” replied Harry. As Bright left, a one-word thought went through Harry's head: *finally*.

After breakfast the next Saturday, Harry went for a fly with Ron and Ginny, coming back into the castle at a little after ten o'clock. A cat met him at the castle entrance, and he followed it to the Great Hall. It was empty, except for a small group near the head of the Gryffindor table, composed of McGonagall, Kingsley, Hermione, Neville, Pansy, and to his surprise, Molly. “Hi, what's going on?” he asked.

Kingsley and McGonagall looked grave. “We are here to tell you that the preparations are almost finished,” said McGonagall. “You can go almost any time, as soon as one hour if you wished to.”

“One hour?” exclaimed Ginny. “Why so little time?”

“They can go tomorrow, or next week, if they wish,” explained McGonagall. “We knew yesterday that things would be ready today. It was our thought that it might be difficult for you two, and them,” as she gestured to Hermione and Neville, “to know that you would go the next day. It might be difficult to sleep, and so forth. This gives you the opportunity to not dwell on it, if you choose.”

“I think we've all dwelled on it a fair amount, much more than I'd like to,” said Harry firmly. “I want to go today, as soon as possible. Hermione?”

She nodded. "I agree, it sounds good. Thank you, Professor, for doing it that way."

McGonagall nodded. "The Aurors have set up a shelter not far from the Ring. They tried to move the Ring, of course, but it cannot be moved. We have set up a few Portkeys, one to here, and one to the Aurors, so people can travel there without Apparating."

"Who will be there, at the site?" asked Hermione.

"That is up to you," said McGonagall. "Of course you will be able to communicate with us after you go in, through Ginny and Neville on your hands; your pendants will not work from within the Ring to the outside. Ginny and Neville will be relaying messages."

"At least that'll give me something to do besides worry my head off," said Ginny. "I think it's safe to say that Neville and I will be looking at our hands the whole time, unless there's a reason not to."

"Understandable," said McGonagall to Ginny sympathetically. "It is fortunate that both of you have such a way to communicate. In any case, if there is anyone whose input you would like available, they should be at the site. Who would you like to be there?"

"Well, them, obviously," said Harry, gesturing to Ron, Neville, Pansy, and Ginny. "And you two, and Professor Snape... I guess Professor Flitwick too, we might need advice about Charms or Rings of Reduction. I can't think of anyone else... Molly, will you want to be there?"

"Of course," she said, looking as though she was trying to keep down her anxiety, and not doing very well.

"Anyone else?" Harry asked Hermione.

"It would be good if a Healer was on call, at least," suggested Hermione. "Healer Haspberg gave us that basic first aid course, but it might be a good idea to have someone ready immediately if something really bad happens." Harry saw Ginny's expression of worry at the very idea.

“I will set up a Portkey at St. Mungo’s; I am sure Healer Haspberg will make herself available should the need arise,” said McGonagall.

Hermione shook her head. “I can’t think of anyone else.”

“We will finish getting things set up, and will let you know when you can come to the site,” said McGonagall. “We will give you more information and advice at that time.” She and Kingsley stood and headed out of the Hall.

“Thank goodness it’s going to be over with soon,” said Harry.

“Not all of us feel the same way,” said Ginny fearfully. “That denial is starting to wear off, now that it’s so close.”

“It’ll be all right,” he assured her. “We’ll be fine, we’ll make it.”

“Could we go outside for a minute?” she asked. He nodded, and they did. They walked to his office, closed the door, and sat down. He saw Ginny’s face for the first time since they were in the Great Hall; she looked like she was about to cry. “I didn’t want to break down there, with everyone around,” she said, starting to sob. “But I can’t help it, I’m so worried...”

He held her as she cried into his shoulder, running a hand through her hair. “I’m coming back,” he said firmly. “You have to believe that. I wouldn’t be going if I didn’t think that.”

“Yes, you would,” she contradicted him, still sobbing. “If your chances were less than even, you’d still go. I know you.” She stopped crying for the moment, and raised her head to look at him. “I know you believe that, and I know that if anyone can do this, it’s you. It’s just that usually when these things happen we don’t have warning in advance, I don’t have a chance to worry. But when you go in there, it might be the last time I see you.”

“It won’t, I promise,” he assured her. “Remember, we can come back out. If we don’t know how to do something, we’ll just go back the way we came, and get out.”

She looked as though she wanted to say something, but didn’t. After a few seconds, she said, “Are you really that sure? You feel completely sure that nothing

will happen to you? This is me, Harry. You won't make me worry any more by saying you're not sure, because I'm already worrying massively."

Trying to be as honest as he could, he said, "I know it's not technically impossible that we could get killed," he admitted, feeling as though he didn't want to say even that much. "But I really feel that it's not going to happen. I can't say why, any more than I've already said. It's just a feeling."

She hugged him, clinging to him tightly. "I've always trusted your feelings, I suppose I can do it this time too." They sat in the silence, holding each other.

* * * * *

Harry and Ginny let go of the Portkey, and he looked around to see a room, about the size of a large conference room. The room only had three walls; the empty space where the fourth wall should have been looked out over a bleak snowscape. The room wasn't cold, so Harry assumed there was an invisible shield covering the empty space, protecting them from the weather.

"From the outside, it looks like an ordinary garden shed," said Kingsley, standing behind him. Harry remembered the tents they had stayed in when they had gone to the Quidditch World Cup; obviously this was just a larger version of that. He wondered how they transported it. Kingsley motioned him to a long, narrow table which seated twelve. He said hello to Flitwick as he sat down. Hugo was also there; Harry assumed he had been invited by Kingsley.

"We advise you to follow a certain procedure for communication," began McGonagall. "You should check in before attempting to enter any given room, after you have observed what you can visually. Tell us what you see, and we will tell you what we can, if anything. We are aware, of course, that each room may contain things we did not know were possible for a Ring of Reduction, or perhaps previously unknown magic entirely." Harry saw Ginny wince at the last sentence. "It is then that you will be calling upon your renowned intuition."

Harry wondered if she was being a little sarcastic in using the word ‘renowned,’ as if she felt that he relied on it too much. “It hasn’t failed me yet,” he said confidently.

“We’ll do that, Professor,” said Hermione earnestly. “What else?”

McGonagall gestured to Snape, who said, “I will brief you on the artifacts you will take. Firstly, you will be equipped with clothes which have been enhanced to protect you against most physical damage. Note the use of the word ‘most’; you are not advised to march into physical danger relying on the clothes to protect you. They are simply an additional safeguard. Between them and the normal spell that protects against physical damage, you should have adequate protection.

“Next, there is this bracelet,” continued Snape. “You, Professor Potter, will wear this. Its function is that it can restore a nearly dead person to total health. But there is an important caveat, so listen carefully. Whether by design or by accident, this bracelet performs its intended function only fifty percent of the time. Once used, it cannot be used again for a year, whether it functions properly or not. My point is that under no circumstances should you do anything unusually risky with the idea that this will restore you if you are injured. It cannot be relied upon; it is only being provided as a desperation measure. Do you understand?”

Harry nodded. “I have a feeling I won’t be needing it anyway. But I assume it could be used for Hermione as well?”

Snape and Hermione spoke at the same time, and Hermione persisted. “No, Harry. It has to be kept for you. And I know what you’re going to say, so let’s not bother with the argument. You are the one who has to survive. You know that. We can’t use it on me, and then be in a position where you need it, but it’s used up. Let’s move on. Professor Snape?”

Harry said nothing, but fully intended to use it on her whether she liked it or not if the need arose. “Continuing, the next artifact is one you will no doubt find familiar, as you used it to deceive me quite thoroughly four years ago,” said Snape reprovingly, as McGonagall handed Harry the Time-Turner. “It has been set to now

function in increments of weeks rather than hours, and will hopefully make any use of the bracelet unnecessary. If you should reach a position from which it appears that you can go neither forward nor back, you should use this, turning it six times to go backwards a total of six weeks.”

“It’ll work inside a Ring of Reduction?” asked Harry, surprised.

McGonagall nodded. “It was tested for this purpose very recently. A volunteer went inside a Ring placed in a remote location and used this, for the purpose of seeing whether it would work in your situation, and it did.”

“So, the person had to stay out of sight for six weeks?” asked Harry.

McGonagall smiled wryly. “It had been a little too long since I had had a true vacation. I stayed in a secluded beach resort in Malaysia; I read, and spent some time as a cat. I really do not do that often enough; it is very relaxing. Six weeks is the time you must use, because any less time than that risks you simply ending up in the Ring, at an earlier time. If you have to use it, you will end up in this location, outside the Ring. A mile north of here, you will find a blinking light marking a supply of Galleons; you should take them and go someplace you will not be seen, far from England. You may choose the place, so long as you stay out of sight.” Harry found himself wondering how Fawkes and Flora would react to the fact that there would be two Harrys and two Hermiones for six weeks; he assumed Fawkes would know enough not to let the Harry at Hogwarts know about the one wherever they ended up hiding, if it came to that. Then he realized that if they left by using the Time-Turner, it must have happened that way, because he would have remembered if it hadn’t. He quickly abandoned the whole line of thought—thinking about the ramifications of using the Time-Turner always gave him a headache—and he focused on the conversation instead.

Snape resumed speaking. “Professor Granger has been equipped with a small backpack containing various supplies, including large quantities of food and water which have been magically reduced in size, first aid equipment, two extra wands, and an Invisibility Cloak, should that for some unforeseen reason become

useful. Finally, there is the artifact which Professor Granger wears, the one that stops time. This should be used as necessary, and should definitely be used immediately upon entering the Ring. The first room will be the most dangerous, as you will not have an opportunity to examine its contents before entering, as you will with the other rooms. Naturally, you will have to deal with whatever may be within the device's effective radius, but it will certainly be better to use it than to not use it."

"Do you have any questions or comments?" asked McGonagall, eyeing them both carefully. They shook their heads. "Well, then, you may proceed to the Ring whenever you are ready—"

McGonagall stopped herself as Harry held up a hand in a request for silence. "Just a minute, the phoenixes are trying to tell us something." They materialized and stood on the table, each phoenix in front of its companion. Harry didn't even notice his eyes going wide at the information he was getting, until he happened to see Hermione having the same reaction.

"What?" asked Ginny anxiously. "What is it?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged a worried look before Harry answered. "They told us... well, they sent us that there's something they can do that'll help us. They can't go in with us, of course, but there's something they can do before we go that they think will save our lives. They can't say how, of course, or in what way, it's just something they know. One of those phoenix-intuition things."

"Whatever it is, absolutely, do it," urged Ginny.

"You might not be happy about it," warned Harry.

"I'm very sure I'll like it more than you being dead. What is it?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged another glance, and Hermione explained. "What they're suggesting is something that's only been done once in phoenix history, and it's only possible now because Fawkes and Flora are partners. Apparently they can... modify us, seems like the best phrase. They can give us the ability that phoenixes have to communicate with each other. What this means is

that... right now, Harry and I can communicate as phoenixes do, through Fawkes and Flora. What they're suggesting would allow us to communicate like phoenixes do, directly. And... it would be permanent."

Everyone else except Snape had expressions of great surprise. "And they can't say exactly how this is going to help you?" asked Kingsley. "I mean, it doesn't seem like the kind of thing that would help that much in the situations you'll be in."

"I know, but they're sure," said Hermione.

Harry glanced at Ginny, sitting next to him; she still had an expression of disbelief. He felt vaguely guilty, for more than one reason. He knew she had to feel that fate was playing a particularly cruel trick on her, considering how she felt about the phoenix communication they already did. He also knew that she knew that there was no choice in the matter; if it could save his life, it had to be done. The only alternative was to not go, and that was unacceptable.

He also felt guilty because he knew that Hermione had... not lied, but shaded the facts of what would happen. Fawkes and Flora considered it to be like bonding, that in two members of the same species would represent the closest possible relationship, like marriage. The only other humans this had been done with before, even longer ago than the millennia or so Fawkes and Flora had been alive, had been married. Harry and Hermione could send to each other, but their bond would be roughly like Fawkes and Flora's—sometimes they would feel what the other felt even without sending, if it was strong enough. Harry wondered how he would adapt to such strong intimacy, but he knew there was no other option, so he didn't debate it with himself. He also knew that Hermione had softened her description of what would happen, because she knew that Ginny would have a hard enough time with it.

Looking at Ginny again, Harry could see the anguish on her face, even though she was clearly trying to not let her feelings show. She looked at him, then down for a few seconds. Finally, she looked at Neville, on her other side. "Neville, could I talk to you for a minute?"

“Sure,” said Neville, and they got up from the table and headed to a door at the end of the room that Harry hadn’t noticed before. The table remained quiet as Ginny and Neville closed the door to the other room.

Harry wanted to talk to Hermione, but not out loud. Are they trying to decide whether they’re okay with us doing this? Harry sent. We have to, they must know that.

Yes, they know, Hermione sent back. You know how this affects Ginny, we both knew when Fawkes and Flora told us about this. Ginny needs time to adjust to it, and she doesn’t have that time right now. She needs to know how Neville feels, and talk to him, since he’s the only one who can really understand how she feels. He can help her deal with it. And please don’t feel guilty about this. You have no choice, we have no choice.

I feel guilty because part of me welcomes this, even though I know how it affects Ginny, he sent. I like doing this with you, it feels good.

There’s nothing wrong with that, she sent. If you could do this with her, even though it meant you couldn’t with me, would you?

Yes, he sent back apologetically.

Don’t feel bad, she sent. I love you immensely, but I would do this with Neville instead of you if I could, that’s the way it should be. As long as you feel that way, you have nothing to feel bad about. Don’t use your energy on feeling bad, use it on trying to help her. This is really difficult for her. She doesn’t want this to happen, but she knows that we’ll die if it doesn’t, and that makes her feel bad for not wanting it to happen. You need to tell her that she shouldn’t feel bad for not wanting it to happen. Just be patient and tolerant, and make sure she always knows how much you love her.

I’ll try, he sent. How do you feel about this?

She sent her feelings, which were similar to his: she enjoyed the communication, the bond with him. Our relationship is what it is, she sent, and it doesn’t take away from mine with Neville, or yours with Ginny. It’s different,

separate. Yes, this makes our relationship very intimate, which is unusual. But it would only be wrong if we were doing this in preference to Neville or Ginny, or to escape from them. That's not the case. This is just something that happened, and your enjoying it is separate from how it affects Ginny. Enjoy it, and do your best to help her.

He sent that he would, and they stopped sending as they waited; Hermione got up and walked around the room a little. After another few minutes, he felt his hand tingle, but was too self-conscious to look at it while sitting at the table. "It's okay, you don't have to look," he heard in his head. "Hermione tells Neville that you feel bad about this. Please don't; it'll only make it worse. I don't blame you. Neville's helped a lot. This is just something I have to adjust to, like you and I had to adjust to losing our privacy when you started helping Snape. It's not instant, and it may be difficult sometimes, but I think I can do it. Right now, the important thing is that you get through this. We can think about this more after that. I love you, I'm coming back in now."

A few seconds later the door opened, and Ginny and Neville walked back to their seats. Ginny stopped at Harry's seat and put her hands on his shoulders from behind. He took her left hand and kissed the back of it, not caring about the others' presence. She patted his shoulder and resumed her seat.

Exchanging a glance, Harry and Hermione walked over to an empty spot and sat on the floor facing each other, legs crossed, knees almost touching. Following the phoenixes' instructions, they reached out and took both of each others' hands, then cleared their minds. "It's best if we have silence," said Hermione to the others, though Harry doubted anyone would have spoken anyway. Closing his eyes, he focused on love, and felt Fawkes perch on his shoulder.

The phoenixes sent the impression that it was done about ten minutes later. Harry didn't feel anything in particular while it was happening, which he supposed meant that his focus had been strong. Not yet opening his eyes, he sent an impression of wondering whether sending would now feel different than it had. She

immediately sent back that it felt a little different; stronger, faster, more direct. Getting his first impression from her since the change, he could see what she meant. He sent that he imagined that the first really noticeable change would be when one of them sent something without having intended to; she agreed.

They let go of each other's hands and stood. "Okay, we're ready," said Hermione to McGonagall. McGonagall gestured to the protective clothes, which Harry thought looked like long underwear as he picked them up. He and Hermione went into separate adjoining rooms; he took his robe and clothes off, put on the protective clothes, and put his usual clothes and robe back on over them. He came out, and a minute later, so did Hermione.

He put the Time-Turner around his neck, wrapping the long chain around his neck twice and tucking it under his robe. He reluctantly picked up the silver bracelet and put it on, clasping and unclasping it to make sure he knew how to take it off in case he needed it to help Hermione. He suddenly experienced a feeling of irritation and annoyance, with some affection mixed in. He turned to her and asked, "Was that you?"

"Was what me?" she asked, as the others watched, interested. "What did you get?"

"You were annoyed at me for fiddling with the bracelet," he said, suddenly understanding from her expression that she had unknowingly sent him the feeling. "You don't want me even thinking about using it on you."

"Of course I don't," she said impatiently. "It was obvious that you were thinking about taking it off, to use on me if it seemed like I needed it, even though you were told not to. I understand why, but it still needs to be saved for you."

"Now I'm getting fear," he said. "What exactly are you afraid of? That I'll use it on you, or that you'll have to use it on me?"

She exhaled in frustration. "Harry, this is going to take some getting used to. I'm getting stuff from you, too, that you don't mean to send. This is a very stressful and emotional situation, you can't be quizzing me on everything you get from me,

or I you.” Harry could see that she had a point, but still wondered what she was afraid of; he reluctantly let it go.

“This seems as though it might be more of a distraction than a help,” commented McGonagall. “It must be disconcerting for both of you.”

“A bit,” admitted Hermione, “but they say it’ll save our lives, and I believe them. Are we ready to go?”

Harry nodded. Turning to Ginny, he leaned in to kiss her, but she put her hands on his shoulders and stopped him. “You’ll get a kiss when you come out of there,” she said with a smile, though her worry showed in her eyes. “It’ll give you extra incentive to come back in one piece.”

He gave her a small smile and said, “I have plenty of incentive, but I won’t forget that.” He took her hand and kissed the back of her fingers. “I will be back.” He saw Hermione finish saying goodbye to Neville, and his eyes met Ron’s, then Pansy’s, then Neville’s. Turning to McGonagall, he said, “We’ll get in touch as soon as we can, once we’ve dealt with whatever’s in the first room.”

“Good luck,” she said solemnly. He and Hermione nodded, then turned and walked through the empty wall, outside into the cold. They cast the Bubble-Head Charm on themselves, having been advised to do so by Flitwick and Snape in case there was an oxygen-poor environment in the first room. They then cast the Protection Charm on themselves as a precaution.

They stopped in front of the Ring, and Harry reached into his pocket for the Floo powder McGonagall had given him. Flitwick had told him that the name he used to enter had to be the one that the creator felt was his true name, so he would have to say ‘Lord Voldemort,’ despite the fact that he had always said Voldemort’s name but refused to use the title. He took out his wand and looked at Hermione, who had done the same; she nodded her readiness. He threw down the Floo powder.

“Lord Voldemort!” he shouted, and stepped on the Ring.

CHAPTER 23

THE RING OF REDUCTION

They were suddenly inside, and the first thing Harry saw was a blur of movement, heading towards them. He registered in an instant that it was a four-legged animal of some sort, but a huge one. It had short, light brown fur with dark green spots, and it had to be seven feet tall and fifteen feet long, though he couldn't be sure, as it was moving towards him very quickly. Hermione touched the toggle of the time-stopping device, but the creature, or at least part of it, was inside its radius of effect. Harry had already decided that if there were any kind of creatures, he would first try the area-effect Imperius Charm. He quickly cast the Charm, hoping there would be an immediate effect, but there wasn't. The animal moved with lightning speed, and a huge paw slammed into Hermione, pushing her into Harry, knocking him across the room.

In an instant, he saw Hermione crumpled against the wall of the room, unconscious; it was as if she had Apparated there. Turning, wand at the ready, he saw the creature frozen in time, and he understood—it had knocked Hermione across the room, and the device had moved out of the creature's range and into Harry's. He had been deactivated by moving out of range, and then activated again.

He rushed to Hermione's side, and winced as he saw blood coming from nasty-looking slashes in her stomach, two large ones and a small one. To his amazement, the claws had ripped through all of her clothes, including the ones that were supposed to protect against physical damage. He saw the end of another gash in her right shoulder, and gingerly moved her to check on her back. There was a gash in the backpack; clearly it had protected her from further damage. The cut on her shoulder stopped where the backpack started.

He reached into the backpack for the first aid kit, now grateful that he'd had the first aid training. With a Severing Charm he cut open her robe, then the protective clothes, until her bra and bare stomach were exposed. He wanted to report what had happened, but had to use both his hands to help Hermione. He stopped the bleeding, applied pressure magically as he'd been taught, then held up his hand. "We were attacked by something really big, with claws. Hermione got slashed, the creature's frozen in time, and..." He trailed off, annoyed at his own stupidity: the same effect that was keeping the creature frozen was causing the same for the outside world, from his perspective. Ginny's face, he saw in his hand, was as still as a Muggle photograph. He couldn't start time to talk to the others, or get advice from Healer Haspberg, without also activating the creature. He was on his own.

He cast the spells that checked her heartbeat and blood pressure. He then checked for internal bleeding, which there was. She could die, he thought in frustration, I don't know how bad her injuries are. He thought about using the Time-Turner and getting her to a hospital, but looking at the creature, he saw a major downside to it: the creature was right in front of the entrance, and would likely stay there if he left using the Time-Turner. That meant that the next time he tried to get in, it would be right on top of him, and would probably kill him before he could react. He thought of putting on the time-stopping device himself and trying to lure it away, but he realized it was so fast that once he activated the device, he wouldn't be able to de-activate it before the creature attacked him. We can't get back out the way we came either, he thought, not without huge risk. Using the Time-Turner was the same as giving up, and therefore giving up on the people two centuries in the future. He had to consider it only as a last resort. He didn't know Hermione would die, he just feared it.

So, what do I do, he thought. I've done all the first aid I can, there's nothing else I can... the bracelet! Yes! He quickly took it off. He knew she would be angry with him, as would Snape and McGonagall, but he didn't care. He had to save her,

that was what mattered at the moment. He put it on her, then looked carefully for a control or switch, which he didn't find; once on, it seemed perfectly smooth. He moved it up her wrist as far as possible, in case all parts of it had to be touching her skin, but it did no good. Was it the case that you just put it on the injured person, and then it worked or didn't work? He didn't know what else he could do, so he had to conclude it hadn't worked.

He knew also that he didn't have infinite time to wait for her to get better, as the device would at some point run out. He didn't fancy his chances against the... he turned for a better look, and saw that it looked like a leopard, though perhaps three times the size of a normal leopard. As he looked at it, he vaguely recalled having read about the creature in the first-year text 'Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them,' but couldn't recall what the creature was called. He did remember that if it was the one he thought it was, it took a hundred wizards to kill one. While he was much stronger than average, he didn't want to take it on if he could avoid it.

He turned back to Hermione, angry with himself. I dragged her into this, and for all my wonderful spells that I come up with, there's nothing I can do for her... or is there? He suddenly remembered something that Healer Haspberg had said during their first aid training, that she had seen people perform nearly miraculous feats of self-healing by sheer power of will, by the belief that it would happen. He wondered if what he had in mind could work, then decided there was only one way to find out.

He cast the Imperius Charm on Hermione, willing her to wake up, if only a little, enough to hear what he was saying. Nothing happened for a half a minute, then she blinked, awake, but barely. "Hermione, can you hear what I'm saying?" he asked. She slowly nodded, eyes almost closed. "Good. Hermione, you're going to get better, and you're going to do it very fast. I want you to tell your body to get better faster than usual; you're going to be able to walk within twenty minutes. Tell your body to do whatever it has to do to make that happen. You can do it; you will

do it.” He stopped talking, continued the Imperius Charm, then sat next to her on the floor. He touched her forehead and held her hand, willing her to get better quickly. He spoke occasionally, telling her she would soon recover, trying to reinforce the message he had already sent.

Ten minutes later, she blinked again, and looked up at him. He smiled, the Charm still in effect. “How are you doing?” he asked.

“I feel wonderful,” she said, “which I suppose is because of the Imperius Charm. I recognize this feeling. Why are you using it?”

“I’m using it to help you get better,” he explained. “I’m telling you to tell your body to heal, and it’s working. Your wounds are even getting better,” he added, gesturing to her stomach; there was already visible improvement.

She smiled and said, “Healer Haspberg will start demanding that you be on call at St. Mungo’s, since you’re the only one who can do it. It is working, I can feel it working, I can feel myself getting better. I think I’ll be able to get up in a few minutes or so. I know we can’t stay long.” She looked up, at the frozen image of their attacker. “Wow, a Nundu... how in the world did he even catch one, never mind get it in here? Good thing we’re using the Bubble-Head Charms, that thing’s breath can kill you.”

“I forgot about that,” he admitted. “We won’t be able to start time moving again until we’re in the second room. Well, until we’ve dealt with whatever’s in the second room.”

She reached for her wand, and began to fix the clothes Harry had Severed in his haste to reach her wounds. “Thank you, Harry,” she said seriously. “Just to be safe, you should keep the Charm going until I’m able to get up and walk a bit.”

He sent the next question rather than speaking it. Are you speaking and acting the same way you would if you weren’t under the Imperius Charm?

Yes, she sent back. I’m in no pain and feel wonderful because of the Charm, but you’re not affecting what I think or say, because that’s not what you’re trying to affect.

As she finished repairing her clothes, she noticed the presence of the bracelet on her arm; she reacted first with horror, then calmed down quickly and sent him a reproachful feeling. I should have known better than to trust you with that.

Again, that feeling of fear, he sent. Why?

Now, she spoke. "Because I don't want you to die."

"I know that," he responded, "but the feelings you've had connected to the bracelet have been more than that, like you're afraid for yourself too. It feels like there's something about it that you're not telling me. What is it?"

She answered immediately. "Snape lied to you about how it works. It does heal people who are almost dead, but the way it does it is by channeling the life energy of another person. Its purpose here was that if you were near death, I could bring you back, but I would die in the process. That was part of what was causing my fear; looking at it was like looking at my death. I wouldn't hesitate to do it, of course. I know you're angry, I can feel it. You need to stop, if you want to keep me under the Imperius Charm; I don't know if you can do both. Pay attention to Fawkes, he'll send you feelings of calm." Realizing that she was right, he did his best to do as she asked. His anger started to fade, replaced by sadness, as he tried to continue concentrating on sending love as part of the Imperius Charm.

She chose feelings to communicate next. I understand that you can't bear the idea of my deliberately sacrificing my life for yours. I can feel your feelings, you know I understand. But you also know that you can't die. If you die, he comes out now, or in two hundred years. Either way, many will die. You know that, and I know that doesn't make the feelings go away, but it's still true. I'm sorry, but you just have to accept it.

I wish I hadn't done this, he thought, not really meaning it. I could have chosen not to, it could end up costing you your life.

You had to do this, she reminded him. It only seemed optional, it really wasn't. And I don't want to die, but if I do, at least I know where we go. It's not so

bad. But if I die, it's only me. If you die, it's a lot of people. Another one of your burdens, I know. Now I feel like Snape was right, and Bright was wrong. You've done so much, this decision was yours to make. You should never feel bad about that.

I understand you didn't tell me about the bracelet before because you knew how I'd react, he sent. But why tell me now?

You asked, she sent. I'm under the Imperius Charm, remember. The purpose is to heal me, but while I'm under it, if you make a request or a wish, I have to follow it. If I weren't under the Charm, I would have avoided your question, like I did before we came in. I just had no choice but to answer it.

He cringed in discomfort as he understood her point. He sent his feelings of regret and anger at himself. I know you didn't mean to coerce me, she sent, you just forgot. I'm happy you were able to use it to heal me, to make me heal myself. I wouldn't have thought of it.

"I come up with the spells when I have to," he said, half-jokingly. "Do you think you're okay to get up?"

"I think so," she replied. "You should lift the Charm, see how I do."

He did, and she grimaced in pain. "Wow, the Charm really does mask the pain. It makes you feel so great, you don't even notice it. Don't worry, it's not that bad, just a surprise." Sensing his feelings, she added, "Please don't feel bad about that. It was a new situation, you'd never had to use the Charm for a long time on someone you cared about. You learned, you'll know not to do it again."

He nodded. "Why was I not killed, then, when I put the bracelet on you?"

"Fortunately, there's a certain thing you have to do once it's on, for it to work the way it's supposed to. And no, I'm not going to tell you what it is. You don't need it for me now anyway, you can do what you did again. Come on, help me up."

He took both of her hands, and slowly pulled her to her feet. "That thing is nasty," she muttered, referring to the Nundu. "We'd have been done for, if not for

this device. But the odd thing is, he knew we had this. Why put something in the first room that we can avoid by using the device?”

“Remember, it was in the range of the device,” Harry pointed out. “That had to have been deliberate. He figured we wouldn’t be able to use it, and he was right. It was just sheer luck that it happened to knock both of us out of range. I guess it likes to play with its food before it eats.” They slowly walked towards the door leading to the second room.

“Can you imagine what would have happened if we weren’t wearing these clothes? It probably would’ve ripped a big chunk out of me.” Harry found that he definitely didn’t want to think about that.

They continued walking until they were in front of the second door. Harry put his hand on it, and it opened to reveal an inferno. They could see nothing but fire, the most intense fire Harry had ever seen. “Well, at least we can do this,” he said. “But again, this is strange, he knows I have the area-effect fire-suppression charm. Why do this?”

She shrugged. “Maybe he thinks it won’t work if it’s intense enough. I’m sure he’s wrong, of course. Ready?”

“The charm will go on as soon as we’re in,” he said. “Seems strange to walk into a fire, but... okay, here we go.” Wands in their hands, they walked through the barrier into the second room.

Harry felt the fire for a fleeting instant before the fire-suppression charm took effect, creating a large, fire-free area around them. The door closed behind them. “Okay, you should turn off the device now,” he suggested. “It’s not going to help in here.”

She did so, and within a second he felt a sharp pain in his right arm, then another in his left thigh. “Turn it back on!” he shouted, and she did.

“Look,” he said, pointing to his arm. Something metallic was sticking out of it. He had never seen anything like it before; it was roughly spherical, but with

razor-sharp edges protruding all around it. "It's not the same, but it reminds me of those things ninjas throw, in those movies."

"I tried not to watch movies where lots of people got killed, but I have read about what you mean. It does look like it's the same principle, yes. Sit down, I'll take care of it."

"There's one in my leg, too," he added, wincing in pain.

She took out the first-aid kit, and applied a local anesthetic to his arm, then removed the metal ball, using her wand. She moved his robe aside, and unbuttoned enough of his protective shirt to move it aside to get to the wound. It took her only a minute to repair it. She started on the one on his leg; the metal was embedded in the side of his left thigh. She removed the metal, then pulled his robe off. "You have to get these off, or at least past the wound," she said, gesturing to the protective clothing that covered his lower half. Feeling his embarrassment, she added, "You're still wearing underwear, Harry, and this is no time for modesty anyway. And you saw my bra, after all."

"Okay, I see your point," he admitted. "Just a usual reaction, I guess." He pulled the pants down to his knees, and she took less than a minute to heal the wound.

As he stood and put his robe back on, he said, "I guess we're going to have to use the Repulsion Charm too. But I can't do both."

"I'll extend mine around you, too," she said. "Stay right behind me, I'm pretty sure it'll work. Once I start time going again, we'll just walk straight, and we'll talk to Neville and Ginny, let them know what's happened. I'll tell them about this room, you tell them about the last one. Ready?"

She pushed the toggle of the device, and they moved forward again. He felt his hand tingle, and he looked at it. "We're fine, we're going through the second room now." He went on to describe what had happened in the first room. They reached the door leading to the third room, and stopped in front of it to complete their accounts, Harry now standing against the wall so Hermione could protect him

with her body and Repulsion Charm. He saw Ginny speaking as he spoke to her; he knew that she was repeating what he said to the others as he said it, to save time.

After he finished, she said, "Snape is surprised the second room isn't worse than it is; Voldemort should know you could get through it. I see what he means."

"Me, too," Harry agreed. "Maybe they'll get worse as we go along. I'm opening the door to the third room now."

"Sand," Harry reported. "All I can see is sand."

"Snape says it's probably quicksand," Ginny reported. "He says that Voldemort mentioned once that he liked the idea of quicksand. He also says there must be something else in there that you can't see now, it wouldn't just be quicksand. That's too easy to get past with a Hover Charm."

Harry saw Snape's point. "Okay, I'll reach in with a hand, see if the air's any different." He put his left hand through, and yanked it back immediately, in considerable pain, grimacing.

"What?" exclaimed a very concerned Ginny.

"Extreme cold," said Harry. "There's no way we can get through it without some kind of protection against it, we'd freeze solid before we got to the next door."

"Snape's surprised again," said Ginny, "because he says that while this is difficult, it's not overly difficult. Like the last one, he expected something worse. He thinks the temperature is absolute zero."

Hermione turned to him. "McGonagall says I should do the Hover Charm for both of us, you should generate the heat to protect us." Harry had learned the spell from the Aurors, who sometimes had to operate in very cold environments; he assumed that Hermione knew it too, but that he should do it because a lot of magical power would be necessary to compensate for a temperature of absolute zero. "The hard part will be the transition from this room to the next. We'll have to jump into the next room, as high as we can; I'll switch from the Repulsion Charm to the Hover Charm, and you from the fire-extinguishing spell to the heat-

generating one. You can't switch your spell too soon, or we'll burn to death; if I do mine too late, we could get trapped in quicksand. Are you ready?"

"Ready," he affirmed.

"Okay, on three. One,—"

"Wait a minute," he interrupted her. "When you say 'on three,' does that mean the one just after three, or—"

"I've never understood why that's not clear," she said, exasperated. "On three means just that, on three. You say, one, two, then you go when you would say three."

"Just making sure," he said defensively. "A misunderstanding right now could kill us, you know."

"I just never saw that it could work another way, but yes, it's better to be careful. I'll say, one, two, then on three, we jump. Okay?"

"Okay," he agreed.

"Ready? Okay. One, two, three!" They jumped, and Harry felt a brief blast of extreme cold before activating the heat-generating spell. But in the same instant, he felt himself being yanked downward, and before he knew it, he was thigh-deep in quicksand. He knew Hermione hadn't done the Hover Charm incorrectly, since he had the feeling of being pulled down rather than falling.

"Harry!" screamed Ginny in his head; he tried to ignore it, since he had to focus on getting he and Hermione out of the situation. "Hold onto me, and do the heat spell!" he shouted at Hermione. As soon as he felt the extra heat from her wand, he ceased his own heat spell and conjured an Attaching Rope, as the Aurors had taught him; the rope had the property of sticking to anything it touched, except for the person who conjured it. Without Hermione's Hover Charm, they were starting to sink faster; the quicksand was up to his chest as he magically sent the end of the rope up to the ceiling. Hermione grabbed the fabric of his robes around his right shoulder, causing him to wince in pain as she pressed the spot where the metal ball had hit him in the second room, then she was able to get her left arm around

his neck. The added weight pushed him down further; now only his neck was above the surface of the quicksand.

Firmly holding onto the Attaching Rope, he was no longer sinking, but it was taking all his strength to hold onto the rope; it still felt like they were being pulled down. Remembering the obstacle in the Triwizard maze that had made him feel as though he would fall into the sky, he decided that something like that was necessary. He silently cast a spell, and got what he wanted: the ceiling suddenly became the floor, and he and Hermione plunged toward the ceiling. Not expecting to suddenly fall upwards, Hermione yelled in alarm, but continued to hold onto Harry's neck.

As they fell, Harry modulated the degree of the spell, and they started falling more slowly. Just as they were about to hit the ceiling, Harry modulated it further, and they were hovering in midair. Hermione reflexively threw her free arm around his waist and clung to him, not sure what would happen next.

Harry let go of the rope, and it floated freely. His left hand free, he looked at it. "The... gravity, I guess, of this room seems to be different," he reported. "Hermione did a Hover Charm, but we fell anyway. I did an Attaching Rope to stop us sinking, then I did... well, I don't know what it is, but I reversed our gravity, and we fell up. I've got it just now so it compensates for whatever Voldemort did. We're floating near the ceiling now, Hermione's doing the heat."

"Not very well," she added, speaking into her own hand. "I'm doing it the best I can, but it feels like it's zero centigrade, it's pretty cold."

"Snape's mad at himself, he says he should have thought of that, that the room would have extra gravity," said Ginny. "McGonagall's saying we can save the blame for later, now we have to get you out of that room."

"Hard to argue with that," agreed Harry, still talking into his hand. "The only thing I can think of right now is another Attaching Rope. Hermione, start wrapping this one around us. When I conjure the new one and send it to the wall,

the room's gravity will take over for a few seconds, and we'll have to hang onto this rope."

Hermione let go of Harry and started wrapping the rope around them, then clung to Harry again, left hand with wand around Harry's shoulders and neck, right hand holding the rope. Harry hoped he could manage the dexterity to do what he had to do, since one hand would be supporting his weight on the rope, and the other would have a wand in it; he had to use that hand to throw the new rope against the far wall. "Ready?" he asked Hermione.

"As I'll ever be," she responded.

Harry conjured another Attaching Rope; gravity pulled hard, and he barely managed to hold onto the first rope as he grabbed the new one at one end. He sent the other end hurtling toward the door, guiding its direction with magic; it hit and stuck to the wall a few feet above the door. He resumed the gravity spell, and he and Hermione were floating again. He flexed his left hand, which felt raw from the cold, and supporting so much weight. He looked into it and said, "Okay, the second rope is in position. We should be able to pull ourselves over."

They let go of the old rope and used the new one, Hermione still holding onto Harry, Harry pulling them along the rope. They were still hovering, but slowly descending, as the rope was attached to the wall at a lower spot. After a minute, they arrived at the far wall. "Okay, we're there," he said into his hand. "We're hovering in front of the door; I'm going to open it to see what's in the fourth room."

He put his hand to the door, and it opened. It looked completely blank, with nothing in it at all; he reported it to Ginny. After a short pause, she said, "Snape says, 'whatever is in there will no doubt manifest itself once you enter. You should prepare to react to whatever might suddenly appear.'"

"Tell him, I will," he replied.

"We have to go in together," said Hermione, "since it takes both of us to stay alive in this room. Ready?"

“On three,” he said. “One, two, three!”

They pulled themselves through the door, and fell to the ground as Harry gradually diminished the spell he was using to compensate for the extra gravity in the third room; Hermione turned off the heat generated by her wand. Harry looked around, alert for danger, but there was none.

Suddenly, Voldemort appeared in the center of the room. “Welcome, Potter.”

Harry immediately cast the Imperius Charm, but it had no effect. He ran forward, thinking it had to be because Voldemort was out of range. Sending a message of caution mixed with the knowledge that he wouldn't heed it, Hermione ran as well, just behind him. He tried the Charm again from a range of ten feet, and again it was ineffective. As he wondered why, Hermione spoke. “It's an image, Harry. A memory.” She started speaking into her hand quietly.

“I have become immune to that spell of yours!” said Voldemort loudly, sneering at what he knew would be Harry's attempt to use it on him. “Well, perhaps not. I am a mere memory. Soon you will be as well, simply in a different way.” Hermione continued speaking; Harry realized that she was repeating Voldemort's words to Neville, who would then relay them to the others.

“I would applaud you for getting this far, Potter, except that I have not made it as difficult as I could have. If you are here it means that Pettigrew, worthless creature that he is, provided me one final service: his betrayal of me. I knew he would go to you, and the spell I put on him only made him want to do it all the more. Of course, I knew he would travel as a rat. You could let me rest, and live out a long and happy life with many children,” continued Voldemort, with an especially nasty sneer, “but you came here instead, as I knew you would. You may be strong, but you are terribly easy to manipulate. That is no less true now than it was two years ago, when your beloved godfather met his untimely demise because you were too foolish to think clearly.” Harry felt anger building, and he suddenly received strong feelings of calm from Hermione. He's trying to bait you, she

reminded him. Focus on love, stay focused. Calming down, he did his best to do that as Voldemort continued speaking.

“Harry Potter, boy of destiny,” Voldemort went on. “‘The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord,’ says the prophecy. You became obsessed, you had to find me, to fulfill the prophecy. But you did not understand that the prophecy has already been fulfilled; you ‘vanquished’ me the day I killed your parents. Especially now, you cannot do so again. I saw in your mind that you are convinced that you will, which is foolishly wrong. That you would subject yourself to this danger only proves that you are not in your right mind. You would do much better to turn back, live your quiet and happy life, and leave fate to itself. But of course, you will not. I suspect you did not even consider the question of whether to come in here, that you knew you would, and did not consider the counsel of those who do not blindly agree with your every thought.

“You had your chance, and you didn’t manage it. Now you have no chance at all. Well, that is not true. You have one more chance, simply a different type. You can do what you have refused to consider. You can turn back; I generously offer this warning. Entering the fifth room will seal your fate. You will not die there, but you will know immediately and unquestionably that you are doomed. I do not expect that you will do as I suggest, but the offer is there anyway. I tell you only that if you do not do as I suggest, you will soon wish you had. And when you do die, I will be awakened, and resume my rightful place as the most powerful wizard in the world.

“So, there you are. Do as you will.” He stopped speaking, and the image vanished.

Harry exchanged a look with Hermione, then looked at his hand. “I want to know what Professor Snape thinks.”

“It does not tell us much more than we already knew,” said Ginny, repeating Snape’s words verbatim. “He is overconfident, which is amply illustrated by the fact that he used an entire room for this purpose.”

“Basically, he’s taunting me,” observed Harry.

“Yes, which is another sign of weakness,” said Snape through Ginny. “Even inducing you to come here was such an indication. Nothing has changed, Professor. There is still no reason to believe that you cannot handle whatever is to come.”

“Does he believe that whatever’s in the fifth room will finish us?”

“Yes, he does; the Dark Lord does not make empty threats. But he does miscalculate, as we have seen.”

“Ginny, would you ask Professor Flitwick if he thinks it’s even possible for the doors to be set so that they can’t open?”

Now repeating Flitwick’s words, Ginny said, “I don’t think they can be set that way, but I also wouldn’t have thought it was possible to get a Nundu in there. I have a feeling that whatever it is, that’s not it.”

“Me, too,” said Harry to himself. To Ginny, he asked, “Ginny, how are you doing?”

She gave him a brave smile. “I’m all right, as long as I don’t think too much. It probably helped that even though it’s been almost a half hour for you, it’s been only ten minutes for me. Keep using that device, and it’ll be over before I know it.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said. “By the way, there’s something I think I should mention. When we entered the third room and we fell into the quicksand, you yelled into your hand—”

“Yes, I know, I’m sorry,” she cut him off. “McGonagall and Snape already talked to me about that, said that it could have distracted you, maybe enough to get you killed. I’m really sorry. I just reacted, because I could see from your face that you were in trouble. This is really hard for me, too, you know.”

“I know,” he assured her. “I just wanted to make sure you knew.”

“Professor McGonagall says to remind you that he said the fifth room wouldn’t kill you. Even if it looks like he’s right and you seem doomed, there’s always the Time-Turner. He doesn’t know that you have that.”

“That’s true,” said Harry. “Not that I would have stopped anyway, just because he decided he wanted to gloat in advance. I’ll just be extra-ready. Hermione?”

She nodded, and they walked forward, up to the door of the fifth room. He opened the door, and again, they saw nothing. “I don’t suppose it’s more taunting?” Harry joked to Hermione. “Like, ‘ha, ha, made you look?’”

“Somehow, I don’t think so,” she said, standing near the edge of the door to see in better. She talked to Neville on her hand, reporting what they saw. “Harry, I’m going in first. If whatever it is—”

“No way,” he said vehemently. “I will, if anyone will. I can defend myself better.”

“He said we wouldn’t be killed here, and I think it’s probably true,” she pointed out. “I’m just thinking, what if it seals us in there somehow, or does something else strange that we can’t imagine. You can still get back out—”

“We can both get back out, with the Time-Turner,” he reminded her.

“Yes, but still, I’d feel better. Please don’t argue with me. I promise to jump right back through if something happens.”

With deep reluctance, he nodded. She stepped forward, and seemed to walk right into a wall. Harry put a hand through the opening, or tried to, and he too came up against a wall. Having a sudden idea, he took Hermione’s hand, and successfully moved their hands through the opening. “It looks like it has to be both of us,” he said.

“It seems like that’s not really good,” she suggested nervously. “Whatever happens, he wants to make sure it happens to both of us.”

“It’ll be okay,” he assured her. “Ready?”

She nodded. Hyper-alert, ready to use his wand at the first sign of anything, he stepped through the door, her hand on his shoulder. They were through... and to Harry’s astonishment, not only was the wand suddenly gone from his hand, but his clothes had disappeared as well. He and Hermione turned to each other,

shocked, and reflexively used their hands to cover themselves. The same thing had happened to Hermione, he saw, and it included the pack with the supplies, the extra wands... he looked at his neck, and saw that the Time-Turner was gone as well. A sickening feeling of dread overtook him, and he wasn't sure whether it was his or hers.

He held up his left hand, keeping his right hand where it was. "Well, now we know what the fifth room does."

Ginny stopped his explanation. "We saw," she said. "Everything suddenly appeared just outside the Ring. Your clothes, the artifacts, Hermione's backpack. They appeared at exactly the places they would be at if you were wearing them, and fell to the ground. Harry, this is really bad." He felt fear, but she was clearly more frightened than he was. Hermione, talking to Neville on her hand, was having difficulty in looking at her hand while both arms were busy covering herself.

"Harry, Professor McGonagall wants to know if you and Hermione are using your hands to cover yourselves."

"Of course we are," he said, mildly annoyed. "I think most people would be."

"She's saying the same thing to Hermione, through Neville. She says, quote, 'Put your hands at your sides, and look at each other.'"

Too stunned to answer immediately, he finally managed, "Why?"

"She says, 'You have much greater problems than being unclothed. Your full attention and focus must be on your situation and your surroundings, so you must adapt to the current situation. You cannot accomplish anything with your hands where they are now.' Honestly, I think she's right, Harry. I know it's strange, but you have to be able to focus on getting out of there."

"Easy for her to say, she's not the one standing here naked," grumbled Harry. "Don't repeat that," he added quickly.

"Sorry, too late," said Ginny. "I'm repeating everything; if you want something not to be repeated, you have to tell me first."

He sighed, and turned to Hermione. This has to be the weirdest situation we've ever been in, he sent. And, really embarrassing.

I'm embarrassed too, she sent. Speaking, she added, "But McGonagall's right, we have to get past this. We'll move our hands away at the same time, all right?"

"On three?" asked Harry, and they smiled. "One, two, three."

They moved their hands to their sides, and Harry found he had competing impulses to look and not look. I feel the same way, she sent. I feel like it's rude to look, but I know we have to get used to it. Don't worry about it, and I'll try not to as well.

More embarrassed as soon as the thought occurred, Harry accidentally sent his concern about unintended physical reactions. The first reaction he got back was amusement. If that happens, don't worry about that, either. I've learned that men don't have total control over that.

More like, almost no control at all, he sent. Did she say how long we were supposed to look?

Until we get used to it, she sent. Until we can focus on our situation without being tempted to take glances, or think about it much.

That could be awhile, he responded.

She sent him back part of what he'd inadvertently sent her. You're attracted to me, she sent, and you don't want to admit that you are because it makes you feel bad thinking about how Ginny would feel. I understand, but you shouldn't worry about that, either. I'm attracted to you, too, right now. It's the most natural thing in the world to react like that when you're with a naked person of the opposite sex. That's part of the reactions we have to get used to. You shouldn't feel bad; again, it would only be a problem if you were thinking how you preferred me to Ginny, and I can tell you're not thinking that. So, don't worry.

I'll try, he sent. Funny thing about people, how I can be worried about us having lost our clothes when it looks like we can't possibly survive this. He looked a

little more, then said, “Okay, I think I’m as used to it as I’m going to get for now. So maybe I can stop thinking about us being naked, and instead, think about this unbelievably grim situation we seem to be in.”

“Yes, it looks really bad,” she agreed. “Obviously, there’s no going back. The problem is, of course, that there’s probably equally bad, or worse, waiting for us. Any ideas on what we can do about it?”

“I think,” he said, “we’re going to find out exactly what, if any, wandless magic I can do. I mean, I did say that I came up with stuff when I had to, but this is a totally different situation. But who knows, remember, children do wandless magic when they’re in life-threatening situations. I know it looks extremely bad, but I’m not going to give up.”

She gave him an encouraging smile. “I’d be amazed if you did.” Looking into her hand, she said, “Neville, ask Professor Flitwick if there’s any chance at all of Disapparating out of a Ring of Reduction.” She listened for the answer, and nodded glumly. “I didn’t think so, I just wanted to make sure.” Harry was surprised he hadn’t gotten the answer in his head from Ginny; she usually repeated everything any of the professors said.

After a minute, Ginny spoke. “Professor Snape says, ‘Please inform Professor Potter that while I did not foresee this particular circumstance, I remain confident that he will find a way to do what is necessary to escape the situation and defeat the Dark Lord.’”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “You did say ‘Snape,’ right?”

Hermione chuckled as Harry waited for the response. “He says, ‘I will forgive his little joke at my expense if he comes out of there carrying the Dark Lord, unconscious, in his arms.’”

“Tell him I’ll do my best, but I find the kiss you promised to be a better motivator.”

“He just rolled his eyes,” Ginny reported. “But I’m glad to hear it.”

“So, ask Professor McGonagall, what’s the situation regarding wandless magic? I’ve never heard much about it one way or the other, but I know it can be done, I’ve done it several times without meaning to. If there’s a way to get out of here by blowing someone up, then we’re all right. I just need to get mad enough.”

After a slight pause, Ginny said, “Professor McGonagall says, ‘Relatively little is known about it; what little is known works in your favor. The more life-threatening the situation, the more likely attempts at wandless magic will be met with success. The best thing to do is imagine that you have a wand in your hand, and do what you would normally do.’”

“Sounds reasonable to me,” agreed Harry. “Ready?” he asked Hermione.

She spoke rather than sent, but he could feel her fear through their link. “Do you really think we have a chance? I mean, look at us. I don’t mind admitting—”

“You don’t have to, I can feel it,” he said. “And yes, I think we have a chance. Something just occurred to me. The reason the phoenixes made this link for us was that they thought it could save our lives. Well, it hasn’t done that yet, so it’s reasonable to think that it will still happen, which means we’ll get through at least one more room. But I also think it means we have a chance to go all the way. I think ‘saving our lives’ means ‘making sure we get through this.’”

“An interesting point,” she admitted. “That’s definitely what you’d call looking on the bright side. Okay, that’s enough for me, for now. Let’s go.”

They walked to the door of the sixth room. “Harry, I just noticed something,” said Hermione, looking at him intently. “You still have your glasses. Why is that?”

Harry was so used to his glasses, he hadn’t even noticed that they should have been gone. “I don’t know. Maybe... ah, okay, I do know. It’s another taunt. It’s his way of saying, ‘I’ll let you keep your glasses, for all the good it’ll do you. See, you should have listened to me.’” His face became a mask of determination. “He’s going to regret that. Come on, let’s go.”

He opened the door, and they looked inside to see yet another empty room. “Well, there’s no raging inferno, so I’d say it’s fairly good so far,” remarked Harry. Hermione reported in on her hand, then nodded her readiness to proceed. They entered the room, Harry again at full readiness... to do what, he wasn’t sure. But he was ready, he knew that.

Wondering when something was going to happen, they slowly walked to the center of the room. “Remember, we have to turn right at the center to get to the door to the seventh room,” Hermione reminded him. They reached the center, and the lighting started to dim. As he was about to say something to Hermione, who was on his right, he heard a voice from his left. “Harry!”

He turned, and gaped to see a smiling Sirius Black standing a few feet away from him. “S-S-Sirius?” he stuttered.

“Harry? What’s going on?” asked Ginny in his head, obviously having seen his expression in her hand.

“Just a minute, I’ll explain later,” he said, staring at Sirius.

“Yes, it’s me,” grinned Sirius. “I’d give you a hug, but, you know, it doesn’t quite seem right at the moment. Are you sure you aren’t having one of those dreams where you forget to put your clothes on?”

Harry chuckled. “Yes, it kind of feels like that. What are you doing here? I thought... well, I mean...”

“That I’m dead,” Sirius clarified. “Yes, that’s true, but we are allowed to visit once in a while, so you’re my first visit. Okay, maybe it’s not such a great compliment, since now that Dumbledore’s gone, the only people I’d really want to visit are you and Remus. Well, and there is old Snivellus, I could say hello to him, just to bother him. Hang around for a bit, make him worry that I’d start haunting him.”

Harry chuckled; Sirius’s sense of humor was much like he’d remembered. “Well, he’s a lot better now, though,” explained Harry.

“Yeah, but he still hates me, though. Not that I care, but you’d think he’d let some things go. But let’s talk about you! Been having quite a busy life, I see. I really envy that. Twelve years in Azkaban, then when I finally did get free, became a prisoner in that rat-hole of a house, all because Dumbledore was so ‘concerned’ about me. If he was so concerned, he’d have let me live! Live, not just survive. People need to be useful, and not just so they can order some demented house-elf around. You know that, look at what you’ve been doing. At the center of the fight against Voldemort, not safely rotting in your room at Privet Drive. There are worse things than death, Harry. Dumbledore didn’t understand that, but I think you do.”

Harry was surprised that Sirius was this bitter, but then he remembered, Sirius had an unusually hard life. “He meant well.”

Sirius shook his head. “Maybe he did, but he sure didn’t act like it at times. You should know that, all those times he left you to stew for the summer with the Dursleys, when the Weasleys would have loved to have you. Hell, he could have left you at Hogwarts! You’d have been just as safe, and it would have been a lot more fun. People could have visited you, you could have learned more, and Dumbledore, who supposedly cared about you so much, could have spent time with you, helped you deal with being Harry Potter. If safety was the only reason for your staying at the Dursleys’, then it wasn’t a very good one.”

Harry had wondered the same thing before, but didn’t want to admit it. “Maybe he just didn’t think of it.”

Sirius laughed. “Hell of a thing not to think of, when it could have made your life so much less miserable. And speaking of that, did he really have to leave you with the Dursleys in the first place? He knew perfectly well what they were like, McGonagall even warned him that they weren’t the kind of people who would treat you well. He said that they were the only family you had. Ridiculous! I was your family, Harry, and we weren’t related. The Weasleys are your family, and you aren’t related. The dictionary may say family are the people you’re related to, but I know better, and so should he have. Family are the people who love you and care for you,

who want to be with you, who don't consider it a burden to have you around, no matter for how long. The Dursleys were never that, to put it mildly. He said it was to protect you, but there were other ways. All those long days, those times you wished you were somewhere else, all the times you were made to feel bad for no reason, he was responsible for that. If he had really cared for you, he would have made sure you didn't suffer like that. He would have made sure you were happy instead of making sure that you just survived."

Harry's heart was beating faster; he heard Ginny saying something in his head, but he ignored it, caught up in the feelings that were overtaking him. He didn't want to think that way about Dumbledore, but Sirius had said several things that he himself had wondered about before. He knew Dumbledore cared for him, but surely it was better to be placed in some risk rather than be subjected to the childhood he had been subjected to. "He may have made a mistake," Harry admitted. "But he meant well."

Sirius snorted. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions, you may have heard. But I can see why you'd sympathize with that point of view. You meant well, when you ran off to the Ministry two years ago. You meant to save me from being tortured, which is a very good intention. But, look what happened."

Harry's face fell; Sirius couldn't be suggesting what it sounded like he was... could he? "Do you mean... you think what happened was my fault?"

"Well, you meant well," said Sirius, imitating Harry's tone when he had said it about Dumbledore a minute ago. "I don't have to tell you that, Harry, you know it already. You've told yourself dozens of times. You eventually stopped, but only because you'd have made yourself crazy if you continued. People can rationalize anything, if you give them enough time. But you know the truth. If you'd just stopped and thought, you wouldn't have gone running off, and I wouldn't have had to go get killed trying to save you. And if you had tried to avoid the dreams instead of welcoming them, it wouldn't have happened either. You did what you wanted, with no regard for the consequences."

Ginny's voice was fading, now almost gone; his whole focus was on Sirius, and the sadness welling up. He fought back tears as he answered. "I... I thought you would have..."

"You thought I wouldn't say things like this," said Sirius, looking at Harry as though he could see through him. "You thought I'd be all heavenly and forgiving and Dumbledore-y. I'm not saying I couldn't forgive you, but you have to face up to what you've done, all of it. This is your history, this is who you are. You've never stopped rushing into action without thinking, doing things that a little thought would have helped you understand could get people killed. Or even yourself; look at what you did with Ginny and that Portkey in Hogsmeade. Rushing in without thinking. You didn't even seriously consider not doing this, and look where you are, without a chance of getting out alive. You have to own up to it, and then maybe I can forgive you."

Harry felt the tears coming, and tried to stop them, but couldn't. "I'm sorry," he managed to get out. "I'm so sorry..."

"Well, that does me a lot of good, doesn't it?" sneered Sirius. "But as long as you're being sorry, it shouldn't only be me that hears about it. I think you may owe them an apology, too." He gestured to Harry's right, where Harry saw, to his horror, the girl and three boys who had been killed in the Three Broomsticks in the first attack on Hogsmeade.

The tears stopped, if only because Harry was so astonished. He had forgotten where he was and what he had been doing; he was totally preoccupied by what he was experiencing. "What are you doing here?" he asked them.

"We were your first sacrifices, to your cause," said one. "The first of many." More Hogwarts students suddenly appeared behind them, the ones killed in the assassin attack.

Lisa Turpin stepped forward. "It turned out that criticizing your friends brings the death penalty. If I'd known, I'd have kept my mouth shut. My father was right, and you know it. You should have left, conducted your crusade where there

weren't so many innocent lives at risk. All of us were seventeen or younger, our lives cut short because of you. And it turns out to be all for nothing, after all. Yet you keep telling yourself you're doing the right thing."

"I didn't kill you!" Harry shouted through his tears, fighting the urge to run.

"You might as well have," she shot back. "I don't have to tell you this, you know it. You just put it out of your mind, in the same place you put all the things you don't want to face up to, that you tell yourself you have to do, for your cause."

"Things like us," added a female voice from behind. Harry whirled to see Rita Skeeter and Cornelius Fudge. "We were innocent, or at least, didn't deserve to die. But you condoned our deaths, you not only let our killer go free, you helped him, you supported him."

"You didn't like us, so you didn't mind seeing us die," said Fudge, his gaze boring into Harry. "You protected Bright and not me because you like him and you didn't like me, that's all there was to it. You were hoping I'd die, so you could get a new Minister, maybe one you thought was better—"

"That's not true!" shouted Harry, breathing heavily, tears occasionally rolling down his face.

"You can't lie to us," said Skeeter contemptuously. "We know better. We're dead, remember? Maybe you didn't think it consciously, but it was in the back of your mind. And you were happy I died, don't deny that."

Sirius stepped forward. "This is your legacy, Harry. The path of destruction you've left in your wake. The consequences of your carelessness, your impulsiveness, your moral compromises—"

"No!" Harry screamed; he felt as though he literally couldn't stand still, couldn't stand to hear any more. He ran away from them, as fast as he could. He wasn't looking around him, he didn't know where he was, but he kept running.

Sirius's voice seemed to come from all around him. "You can't hide from us! No matter how far you run, we'll always be with you!" He kept running until finally he fell to the ground, exhausted.

He felt love, reaching out to him. No, it's a trick, he thought, they just want me to come out again, so they can tell me more about how bad I am, what I did. I can't listen to it anymore, I can't stand it. I have to stay here.

Don't be afraid, she sent with love. It's me, it's Hermione.

Go away, he thought, leave me alone. You're trying to trick me, to get me to come out. You're just going to tell me about how I got you killed, how all these awful things happened to you because of me. Leave me alone.

She sent him more feelings of love. I'm not dead, she sent, and I chose everything that's happened. I don't regret anything I did to help you. I love you, I want you back. Please come with me.

You couldn't love me, look at what I've done. You're not dead, but you soon will be, because of me. I should have gone alone, I should have done everything alone. Look at everyone who's died because of me. Leave me alone, no one else will suffer because of me if I stay here.

People will suffer if you stay there, she sent patiently. You're doing this to save people, and you have. You've saved dozens, hundreds. Please come out, they're gone. They won't bother you again. Ginny needs you, she's worried about you. For her sake, please come back. Just look around, there's nobody there. Just me.

He sent his feelings of fear; she continued to reassure him that he was safe, that he would be all right. He sent images of what had happened. That wasn't Sirius, she sent. None of those people were real. We're in the Ring of Reduction, and the room you were in was set with some artifact that causes people's worst fears to come to life. They run away, hide in their mind like you are now, and eventually go into a coma and die. If that happens, Voldemort wins, and I'll die too. I can't get out of here without you. I love you, Ginny loves you, we want you back. Please come back.

She continued sending him love. He was afraid to move, but he didn't want her to die, he didn't want any more people to die because of him. He had to help her. How do I come back, he asked.

Just focus on my feelings, she sent. Focus on that, and open your eyes. You can do it.

He felt as though going back was difficult, like a leap off a cliff. He knew he had to, though. He tried to open his eyes, to will himself back.

He looked up and saw Hermione's worried face. He looked around and saw that they were sitting on the floor in the Ring, in the fifth room. Then he remembered what had happened, what he had seen, and he burst out in tears. She moved closer to him and held him, one arm around his back, one holding his head. He put his head on her shoulder and cried.

It'll be all right, she sent. It's over now. That wasn't real.

The people weren't real, but what happened to them was, he sent as he continued to cry. I'm responsible for that.

No, you aren't, she sent. You only fear that you are, that's what the room does. You've been through all this, and the conclusions you've reached aren't rationalizations, they're the truth. Fewer people have died than would have if you'd done nothing. That's the truth. Your mind showed you that because it's what you fear, but it's not the truth. You're not responsible, the ones who did the killing are. You know that.

It's hard to accept. Part of me knows you're right, it's just hard to accept.

I know, she sent, but it's true.

A few seconds later, as Hermione continued sending love, Harry heard Ginny's voice in his head. Desperation in her voice, she exclaimed, "Harry, I was so worried, I'm so glad you're back. It'll be all right, I heard what happened. I love you, we all do. You'll be all right. Just remember I love you, I always will."

His tears started to fade as he focused on her. He moved his left hand off Hermione's back and held it up. "I love you too," he said. He took a few deep

breaths, trying to recover. He felt he was finally getting back into his right mind. He moved his head off Hermione's shoulder, and looked at her. "Thanks," he said.

She nodded compassionately. "I'm just glad you made it back."

"I never would have, if not for you." He wiped his eyes with his hand, and with a very small smile, asked, "Do you have any tissues?"

She chuckled, happy that he felt better enough to make a joke. "I seem to be out, sorry."

"I assume the same thing happened to you," he said, thinking about it for the first time. "And I assume it was Skeeter. How did you get out of there?"

"Yes, it was Skeeter," she said, clearly troubled at the memory. "It was pretty bad, as you can imagine. As for how I got out... ironically, it was because of you, indirectly. Neville was able to pull me back before I got too far gone—"

"I heard Ginny too, at first, but I kept ignoring her. Eventually, I couldn't hear her."

"The same thing would've happened to me... except he was able to fight for my attention in a way Ginny couldn't. Talking to Ginny, he found that you were slipping away from her, and he could see the same thing happening with me. But unlike Ginny, he could turn up the volume on the way my hand tingled. It tingled so much it was painful, and I couldn't ignore it. He talked to me, made me tell him what was happening. Skeeter's image kept trying to get my attention away, but Neville was persistent, and he talked me back. Apparently Snape had heard of the artifact, and was able to tell Neville what it did, so he could tell me. That helped me get the strength to ignore Skeeter, and get out of the room. Once I was in here, my mind cleared up, and I was able to go in there and drag you out, then try to get you to come back. It took a while, I was afraid it wouldn't work. But it did, and the reason is..." She prompted him with her eyes.

His mouth opened slightly as realization dawned. "The phoenixes, what they did, the link they made. Without that, you couldn't have reached me."

She nodded. "I don't think it would have worked through them, it would have been too indirect. I had to be there in a strong and direct way."

"I still think we can get out of here," he said. "I don't think they'd have bothered to do this if we were certain to die, and maybe their intuition would have told them if we faced certain death, and they'd have told us. Are you ready to go to the seventh room?"

"Ready when you are," she agreed. "We have to go through that room again, of course, but this time we know what's going to happen, we can deal with it. They'll talk to us; Skeeter did when I went back in to get you, but I was able to ignore her. We'll both have to do that. Okay?"

"I can do it," he said. "The real Sirius wouldn't want me to pay attention to that, I'll just keep that in mind. By the way, do you think—or, does Snape think—that this was put here just for us to suffer a bit?"

"It could easily have killed us," she pointed out, "but yes, Snape thinks that's basically it, that he wanted us to suffer. Whatever's in rooms seven and eight, he must be pretty sure we can't get past it. Snape still thinks he's wrong."

"Funny, I was saying before that a lot of the times I've survived it's been because of others, not me, and that happened now even though we're in here alone. Without the phoenixes and Neville, we would've been done."

"And I'm sure we'll get outside help again, if we need it," she assured him. "Let's go." She took his hand to make sure they wouldn't be separated.

They walked into the sixth room, and Sirius appeared again, about ten feet in. He talked to Harry, taunting him, but Harry resolutely ignored him, walking through his image at one point, and looking over to Hermione for support at another. They were soon at the door to the seventh room, and Harry put his hand on it to open it. They saw a vast space, with no walls or ceiling; it seemed to go on forever. Harry wanted to pause before going in, but he wanted to be away from the images that continued to harass him. "Ready?" he asked Hermione, who nodded.

Again ready to attempt wandless magic, he walked in, still holding Hermione's hand. They waited for a few seconds, but nothing happened. Looking around from the inside, they could still see no ceiling or walls, except for the one behind them. Hermione looked at her hand and reported what they saw. "This may be the room's only feature," said Ginny, relaying Flitwick's response. "If you can't see anything, it's at least a few dozen miles in every direction." Harry remembered from Flitwick's lectures that every dimension in the room had to be the same length.

"The Dark Lord is powerful, so it could be vast," Ginny now said, and Harry didn't have to wonder who it was, since only one person around him referred to Voldemort as 'the Dark Lord.' "It could conceivably be thousands of miles in each direction."

That wouldn't be good, thought Harry, wondering how long it would take to cover thousands of miles. Probably we'd starve to death first, he thought. "I assume, Professor Snape, that this is also so we can suffer? Slow, painful death, that kind of thing?"

"Yes, exactly," came the response. "I strongly suspect that whatever is in the eighth room is something much like what was in the first three, something he believes will surely stop you. Of course, the sixth room should have stopped you as well, but it did not."

"What's the situation as far as Apparating inside a Ring of Reduction?" asked Hermione into her hand. Good question, thought Harry; if it is thousands of miles, that's our only chance.

"Professor Flitwick says, 'You can Apparate as much as you want within one room, it's just like Apparating in real life. You just can't from outside to inside, or from inside to outside.'"

"That's good, I didn't know that," he said, encouraged by the information. "Then there's hope, because I know I can Apparate without a wand, I've done it before. I should be able to Apparate us across."

“How far do you think you can go at once?” Hermione asked him, speaking into her hand so Neville could hear her question and report it to the others.

He did the same, holding up his hand. “I don’t know if I want to try to go further than I can see, so maybe five miles at a time. If I can do that, and if I can Apparate once a second, I could cover three hundred miles in a minute. Even if it was several thousand miles long, it wouldn’t take that long to make it across. It’s definitely worth a try.”

“Okay, let us know when you’re going to start,” said Ginny. “Professor McGonagall wants you to check in every five minutes—or what you guess is five minutes, since you don’t have watches—and for me not to talk to you so you don’t get distracted. If she needs to say something, Neville will say it to Hermione, who you’ll be escorting, right?”

“Yes, I will, we have to stay together,” he agreed. He turned to her and said, “Ready?”

She nodded, and he stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. As he was getting ready to Disapparate, he involuntarily glanced down, and once he had, found it hard to move his eyes. He suddenly received a feeling of great amusement. Now you’re really getting distracted, she sent.

I didn’t see this before, he sent back, somewhat embarrassed but glad that she wasn’t bothered.

I should have done a spin for you, she sent jokingly. But I’m glad you like it. Not that it matters a lot, but it’s good for my ego. I’ve never been that happy with my body.

Why not? he sent, it’s really good. I’m sure Neville’s happy with it.

Yes, he is. I know it’s all right, I think a lot of women feel this way. All those women in those Muggle beauty magazines, we think there’s something wrong with us if we don’t look like that. I hope you compliment Ginny about that often.

I do sometimes, but not that often, I just don’t think of it. I’ll try to remember to do it more. Okay, I’m going to start Apparating now.

Looking at the horizon, he Disapparated them away. Upon Apparating, they turned around; they could see the wall, but it was far in the distance. As he looked carefully, trying to gauge the distance, he got an impression of her, behind him, looking down, as he had at her a minute ago. You're doing that just to tease me, he sent.

Only partly, she replied with humor. What, you can but I can't? That's not fair.

No, it's just not so interesting with men, he sent, as he turned to face her.

For you, maybe, but I'll be the judge of that. I think Ginny and I will be exchanging opinions after this is all over.

Harry chuckled. You'd better not, he sent. I could do the same thing with Neville, about you.

No, you couldn't, I could feel your embarrassment just at the thought. Enough joking around, we should get going. Be careful to go in a straight line, or it could be hard to find the door once we get to the other side.

I'll do my best, he sent. Here we go.

He chose a point far ahead, and Apparated them there, then again, and again, and again. Trying his best to go in a straight line, he did manage to do it about once every second. He guessed they were traveling between five and ten miles every time, but of course, there was no way to be sure. He focused on going straight, and fast.

After a while, Hermione sent that he should stop. He did, and she said, "I'm looking ahead, forward, or what's my best guess at forward since this started. If we both turned and looked, we'd have no way to know which direction to go, since there aren't any reference points, and we don't have a wand for the Four Points spell. So I'll keep looking ahead, and you look around, see if you can see anything." She then held up her hand and started reporting in.

Harry looked in all directions, but saw nothing. “I’ll start trying to go farther each time, maybe fifteen or twenty miles.” She nodded, and they started again as she pointed in what she thought was the right direction.

After another period of time, they stopped again. Harry was starting to tire from all the concentration, and the scenery was exactly the same: the floor was visible, nothing else. “We must have gone over ten thousand miles by now,” he reported to Ginny in annoyance. “Does anyone have any ideas about how long this thing could be?”

After a short pause, Ginny replied, “Professor Snape says that theoretically, it could be anything. Professor Flitwick... they’re having a disagreement; Snape thinks it’s not impossible that it’s hundreds of thousands of miles, but Flitwick doesn’t think it could be that long. Snape says that Flitwick wouldn’t have thought it could be as long as it’s been so far; Flitwick says he can’t be sure, he just thinks it’s not that long.”

As they argued, Harry had a sudden recollection of the last time he’d had to Apparate blindly for a specific purpose: the end of the Apparation crisis the previous summer. Remembering how he’d helped end it, he had an idea. “Hang on a minute, I’m going to try something.” He put his hands on Hermione’s shoulders, concentrated, and Disapparated. They Apparated a few feet from what was clearly the door to the eighth room.

Hermione gaped at him, and reported their position. Anticipating their questions, Harry said to Ginny, “Tell Snape and Kingsley I did the same thing I did at the end of the Apparation crisis. They can explain it to everyone else.”

“Kingsley says, ‘I can tell them about it, but I can’t explain it,’” reported Ginny. “Snape is telling everyone, I guess you knew he got it from your memories. And from me, great job. You’re so close, only one more, and you’re through.”

Harry couldn’t help but think that this one would be the hardest, but Ginny was happy, and he didn’t want to bring her down. “Okay, we’re going to open the

door to the eighth room now, see what's inside." He glanced at Hermione, and placed his hand on the door to open it.

What he saw made his heart sink. It looked like a downpour, but of magic, not of rain. He looked closely to try to identify what was in it, then spoke into his hand. "It's a bunch of stuff going from the top of the room to the bottom, like the heaviest rain you've ever seen; I doubt there's a half inch between any two things. There's Killing Curse bolts, there's... what looks like foot-long strands of fire-imbued lightning, and there's metal things that are moving so fast I can't tell what they are, but I'd guess they're the same things from the second room." In that instant, he felt sure that he and Hermione weren't going to walk out of the Ring alive. Choosing a grim understatement, he added, "So, it doesn't look real good." From how Ginny's expression had changed as he reported the room's contents, he could tell she felt the same way. She looked sick, trying to put on a brave expression and not doing very well.

Hermione had bent down to the floor, and yanked a finger out from the doorway, wincing in pain. Alarmed, Harry asked, "Are you crazy? Why did you put your hand in there?"

"Just a finger, so it wouldn't be a big deal if I lost it," she half-joked. "Don't worry, I found a spot where the stuff wasn't hitting, because of the angle of the door. Not that it matters that much, but it's also absolute zero in there."

Oh, great, thought Harry. He really put the kitchen sink into this one. Ginny reported, "Professor Flitwick is really impressed that Voldemort managed to put four separate characteristics into a room." Obviously speaking in a faint whisper so that only he could hear her, she added, "Nobody else seems that impressed. Mum and Ron gave him dirty looks when he said it. I wasn't exactly thrilled."

"I can understand that," he agreed. "This is when I'd be using the Time-Turner, if I still had it. Ask Snape what he thinks of our chances now."

A few seconds later, she said, "He says, 'My confidence remains unwavering.'"

Despite the direness of the situation, Harry laughed. “Tell him I appreciate it, and just for that, he’ll get a hug when I get out.”

She smiled, and relayed the message. “He says that your intuitive skills have taken a sudden turn for the worse. Speaking for myself, I don’t suppose there’s any chance that you’d believe me now if I told you I got a message from Albus.”

“Afraid not,” he said. “Hang on, let me think for a minute.” Suddenly weary, he sat on the floor; Hermione joined him. He exhaled and said, “This is really amazing. I mean, we wouldn’t have a chance even if we had wands, and every artifact that was ever invented. What I wonder is, why didn’t he just do this in the first room? We’d have been dead before we could react.”

“Maybe he just wanted to make sure we suffered first, or that he got to gloat,” she suggested. After a few seconds, she added, “Or, maybe he was afraid that if you were suddenly faced with it, with no time to think, you’d instantly come up with something to defend against it. This way, you look at it in advance, and decide there’s nothing you can do.”

“Interesting thought, although I can’t imagine what I could come up with.”

“You couldn’t have imagined coming up with the Cruciatus Curse shield until you did it,” she pointed out

He nodded in acknowledgment. “Yeah, but this seems really different.”

“‘Seems’ is the key word there, I think,” she said stubbornly.

He thought for another minute, then said, “I should tell Ginny to tell the others to start teaching the energy of love more often, as much as they can. Maybe if enough people know it, they can defend against Voldemort better. He’ll need time—”

“No!” she scolded him, and he could feel her anger as well. “You’re not going to talk, or think, like that. We will get through this. We are not going to die.”

He paused for a moment, taken aback. “Um... you have looked into that room, right?”

“Yes, and stuck my finger in too, if you remember,” she retorted. “But I’m with Snape, you’re going to come up with something. If you can’t think of anything, then we’re just going to walk into the room anyway, and I’ll trust that something will happen before the things hit us.”

“I would think that you’re kidding,” he said quietly, “except that I’m getting your feelings, and I know you’re not. Thank you.” He paused, and thought for a minute. “Okay, I’m going to think about it the way you think I should. We will get through it. The way must exist, I just have to figure out how.”

“That’s better,” she said encouragingly. A minute later, Harry could feel her feeling of being struck by a sudden idea. “What Ginny said, that joke about her getting a message from Albus, made me think of something. You might want to try asking him yourself.”

Puzzled, he asked, “You mean, try to fall asleep, or wait until I do?”

“If you have to. But I was thinking of something else. You could try to reach him here, now.”

Harry shook his head. “He’s said he can only talk to me while I’m asleep.”

“You told us that he said it was because your mind was too active the other times,” she pointed out. “There is a way to do this, I’ve read about it. Mystics especially do it when they want to communicate with the deceased who aren’t ghosts. The key part of it is clearing your mind, and you’re already good at that. I think we should try.”

“We?” he asked.

“I could help you, because of our link!” she said, suddenly becoming excited. “I could reinforce what you’ll be doing. I’ve read that when you do this, you want to get into a really deep mental state, a place where you’re not aware of anything physical. What you’d be looking for is... you know how it is when you’re really involved in something, that you forget about the passage of time, or anything else? You look up at the clock and think, wow, has it been an hour already? That’s the basic form of what I’m talking about. In this case, you’re going to just not think

about anything, clear your mind completely, for a long time. If you do it well enough, Albus will be able to talk to you, and maybe even you to him. This can work.”

He nodded, again receiving her conviction through their link. “And you think he’ll tell me something that’ll get us through that?”

“I don’t know, but it’s absolutely worth a try,” she said firmly. “Remember, he’s helped you before when it seemed crucial, even when it wasn’t what he would usually do. The whole reason he did what he did, gave up his life and went where he is now, was to defeat Voldemort. He wants that, and to protect your life so you can do that. This is the critical moment, where either you’ll defeat Voldemort, or you’ll die; there’s no in-between. If he’s ever going to do something he wouldn’t usually do, it’s now.”

“Or maybe he can do something else, like somehow shut off what’s going on in that room,” Harry suggested. “Something we can’t imagine but that would help us. It’s a good idea, and definitely, the best one that could be thought of right now.”

“Good,” she said. “Just a minute.” She spoke into her hand, letting the others know what they were going to attempt, and cautioning Neville and Ginny very firmly not to look at their hands for any reason until they heard from she or Harry. Ginny joked to Harry that she’d ask Molly to take the Portkey back to the Burrow and get her an oven mitt so she wouldn’t be tempted.

“I assume you just got that,” he said, referring to an impression he’d just received from Fawkes, that he and Hermione should sit facing each other, holding both hands, as they had when the phoenixes had bonded them to each other.

“Yes, I did,” she said. “It’s interesting that they have advice like that. It must be that the kind of state we’ll be looking for is one that’s more common for phoenixes. Fawkes can commune with Albus, after all.”

“That makes me wonder,” he said, “if he wanted to tell me something, couldn’t he do it through Fawkes?”

“I thought of that, but maybe it’s the kind of thing he couldn’t tell you that way,” she suggested. “Phoenixes can’t transmit some kinds of information, and the way spells work may be one of them.” Harry nodded his agreement.

“Okay, let me mention a few things before we start,” she continued. “While we’re doing this, don’t think specifically about the fact that you want to talk to Albus, or what you want him to tell you. Just decide in advance that it’s your intention, then don’t focus on it. Be receptive to whatever comes, even if it doesn’t seem all that connected to what you’re looking for. Just keep making your state of mind deeper and deeper; stuff will come to you without you having to look for it. Okay?”

“I understand. It’s a little like the energy of love, in a way, just more so. We have to focus to do that, too.”

“Which is why I think we can do this,” she affirmed. “Ready?”

“Let me get comfortable,” he said. “Or, as comfortable as I can get, sitting naked on a hard floor. It’s funny, though, it’s gotten to the point where I don’t even think about being naked, except for things like comfort problems. I’m beginning to see why some Muggles like to go to those nudist colonies, it’s kind of... I don’t know, freeing, once you get over the embarrassment.”

“We’ll go to one after we’ve graduated from Hogwarts,” she teased him. “We’ll get Ginny and Neville to come with us.”

“Well, we have to invite Ron and Pansy, too,” said Harry. They both burst out laughing at the thought of how Ron would respond to the suggestion. “Okay, I’m ready,” he said after their laughter had died down.

They reached out and took each other’s hands, wrists resting on their knees. Harry cleared his mind, just as he did every night for Occlumency practice. He reminded himself that he wasn’t going to sleep, and then he closed his eyes and focused on having no more thoughts. He could feel Hermione doing the same thing.

He started reaching a deep state of mind very quickly, because of his link with Hermione. It was as though when she went to a deeper level of awareness, she tugged him along with her, and vice versa. Each one reinforced the other, and helped the other along. Within ten minutes, he had no thoughts, just an awareness that he was experiencing a type of consciousness he never had before.

A few minutes later, images started coming to him. He saw himself Disapparate to the roof of a building as a child, to escape Dudley and others chasing him. He saw himself make the glass at the zoo disappear. He saw himself and Voldemort in the small, enclosed space in the airplane, as he performed the Severing Charm that took off Voldemort's hand, then snatched Voldemort's wand. A memory of Dumbledore appeared, from the first class of the sixth year, emphasizing the primacy of thoughts in magic; the image changed to Dumbledore talking to him in his sleep, during the summer. "Our thoughts are highly creative, far more so than is commonly understood in the physical realm," he heard Dumbledore say again.

Images started to come faster; he calmly let them pass, taking in each one and waiting for the next one. He saw himself telling the others that having spells come when badly needed might be a characteristic of the energy of love. He saw himself an hour ago, causing Hermione to heal serious injuries with a spell and a suggestion; she had done it because she was convinced she could. He saw Snape suffer pain after the Cleansing had been reversed because he thought he would. He saw himself come up with the area-effect Imperius Charm because he suddenly knew he could. He saw Dumbledore saying, "You would be amazed at what you can do if you simply believe that you can." He saw himself suffer terrible pain after hitting a giant in the head with a tank. He remembered how his power suddenly increased after he fell in love with Ginny. Other such images came to him, and without conscious thought, he felt as though they were pieces to a puzzle, and the pieces were coming together.

He felt another small push from Hermione, making him feel more and more that he would soon understand. He saw himself and Dumbledore in the phoenix place, as Dumbledore explained to Harry that they were creating it with their thoughts. He saw Dumbledore explaining the nature of the spiritual realm, that it was composed of love. He saw Dumbledore telling Harry that his ‘power the Dark Lord knows not’ was love, and for the first time connected it to the idea that the spiritual realm consisted of love. He heard the Sorting Hat sing, ‘So keep in mind that you may know/What you think you do not/And what you think that you don’t have/You have already got.’

Then he saw Dumbledore—not in a memory, or as he saw him in the phoenix place, but in a less physically distinct way, like a slightly fuzzy picture. Dumbledore spoke, in a deeper tone than Harry had ever heard him use before.

“Magic is thought, made manifest. Some thoughts are creative; others are limiting. You think you must use a wand, so you do. You think you cannot do certain spells, so you do not. You are now understanding what you have known all along, but did not allow yourself to believe, except in the most dire of circumstances.”

In a way, it sounded much like things Dumbledore had said before, but Harry’s state of concentration was so deep that he was able to put it together as he never had before. Dumbledore’s words were the final piece to the puzzle; with a flash of realization, he knew what he needed to know, he understood how it worked. In an instant, he fell back into his normal consciousness.

He opened his eyes, and the first thing he saw was Hermione’s face. Eyes wide, she looked at him, a question in her eyes. He sent the question, how much of what happened did you get?

Images, feelings, just pieces, she sent. I know something important happened, I know how you feel, I know we’re going to be all right. I just don’t know the details, I don’t know how it happened. Please tell me.

“It’s better if I use words, maybe I’ll send some things,” he began. He related the details of what he had experienced, sending feelings when he reached the part about Dumbledore.

She stared in amazement. “It sounds wonderful. But what did you learn, or understand, about magic?”

“Anything that can be done by magic, I can do,” he said simply. “And I don’t need a wand.”

Again, she gaped. “I don’t believe it... how does that work?”

“A lot of it was stuff he’d already told me, I just hadn’t put it together that way before,” he said. “He had said that thoughts are highly creative, and that magic had a lot to do with thoughts. But the really important part was... he had said that the spiritual realm is made up of love, what we would call love. That’s why love is the best feeling in the world, it’s what the universe is made of. When we feel it, we’re in tune with what we really are, where we come from. So, when we use the energy of love, and love and the spiritual realm are the same thing, what we’re really doing is using spiritual energy, the energy of the universe, to put it that way. That’s why it doesn’t work for anything destructive, because you can’t be destructive in the spiritual realm. Love in its purest form can’t be destructive.

“And because it’s spiritual energy, and the spiritual realm is the source of everything, there’s pretty much nothing it can’t do. The only things it can’t do are the things it shouldn’t do, like kill, deliberately cause pain, and so forth. The only reason I couldn’t do things before was that I thought I couldn’t. That’s how I was able to come up with new spells when I needed them badly; in those situations, I managed to overlook the fact that I couldn’t, or shouldn’t have been able to, do the spells. Albus helped me realize that I can do whatever I need to do. And it’s the same thing with wands; they aren’t necessary, it’s just that we think they are. It’s like, if you learned to walk from being a baby using crutches, you wouldn’t be able to walk without them. The energy of our thoughts is what makes the magic, not the wands. It all made perfect sense.”

“It sounds beautiful,” she enthused. “I hope I can learn that. You’ll have to try to teach the other five of us. I could feel what you felt, and it was incredible. I’m so happy the phoenixes bonded us, that I got to share that with you.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, you know,” he said sincerely. “You helped me reach a state I’m sure I couldn’t have gotten to on my own. And the phoenixes... I think this was what they meant, this was why they bonded us.”

“It makes sense,” she agreed. Looking at the door to the eighth room, she asked, “So, how do we get through that?”

“Like this,” he said, as he waved his hand as though a wand were in it. They were immediately surrounded by an energy field, roughly spherical in shape, which they could see through easily. It didn’t have just one color, but had horizontal bands of color; the colors of the rainbow, slowly moving up and cycling through continually. “This will protect against anything—magic, physical damage, mental attacks, and negative environments. While you’re in this, nothing can hurt you. Shall we?”

She smiled, and turned to walk through, but then stopped. “Harry... you said you can do anything that can be done by magic. In that case, could you conjure us some robes? I’d really rather not go out of the Ring like this.”

Smiling, he nodded, and conjured two robes. They were shaped like normal wizard robes, but they had an unusual design: like the shield, their color was horizontal bars of the colors of the rainbow, each color gradually becoming the next. He handed her one, and as they put them on, he said, “I made them so the colors would move up, like the spell, but very gradually, about an inch a minute. I just thought it would be neat.”

“Why the rainbow? For the spell, I mean? Does it have to be a rainbow?”

“No, it could’ve looked like anything. I just liked the idea that the rainbow covers all the colors, and this shield covers all negative magic. I think I got the idea from something Remus once did. I’ll tell you about it later.” He held up his hand. “Everything’s okay,” he said. “We’re going into the eighth room now.”

“Are you sure?” asked an amazed Ginny.

“I’m very sure,” he replied. “I’ll be expecting that kiss.” He put his hand down, took Hermione’s, and they walked through the door. They both looked up as they walked through, as if they were looking at rain.

“Pretty nice umbrella,” she commented.

“Glad you like it,” he said. They walked straight, until they reached the next door. “We’re leaving the eighth room, entering the ninth,” he reported on his hand. The door opened, and he blinked in surprise as he saw Hermione look around in confusion. Except for a small bed in the far corner of the room, there was nothing there. No Voldemort. Harry activated the spell that would reveal anything invisible, but nothing changed.

He and Hermione exchanged a look of confusion, and Hermione pointed to the wall near the bed. “Look, there’s some sort of display on the wall.” They briskly walked over, and saw on the wall a two-foot-by-two-foot magical diagram showing each of the nine rooms. In the ninth room, there were two dots near the far wall with the names ‘Harry Potter’ and ‘Hermione Granger’ under them; it reminded Harry of the Marauders’ Map.

“He’s been keeping track of us, he must have been awakened when we entered the Ring,” realized Harry out loud. “He must have left when he saw the eighth room didn’t kill us.”

Hermione shook her head. “He must have left after we got into the fifth room,” she said confidently. “He thought we were dead after that, there’d be no reason for him to stay. He only waited that long because if he left sooner, he’d have been seen by the others, who would have told us, and we could have gone back the way we came. He wanted to make sure we were trapped.”

Makes sense, thought Harry. “Well, no point in hanging around. Let’s go.” They took a few steps, and Harry put his hand on the door.

They walked through, and were suddenly outside, on the snowy ground. The first thing he saw was Ginny bolting from the shelter, running towards him so

fast that he was concerned she would slip and fall in the snow. She didn't, though, and ran into him so hard that she almost plowed him over. She held him tightly, and he could feel her start to cry. Confused for a second, he realized that they were tears of joy and relief, the pent-up emotion that she couldn't release while focusing on communicating with him, being his link to the outside world.

"I can't believe it, I can't believe it," she gasped as her crying wound down. "I was sure, we were sure you were finished." She kissed him, then hugged him again; he got the impression that she never intended to let go of him.

"It's over," he whispered. "It's all over."

She shook her head. "This one, maybe, but—" She stopped herself in mid-sentence at his smile. Giving her a significant look, he repeated, "It's all over. At least, it will be, very, very soon." Neville and Hermione had just finished their reunion, and the four headed back to the shelter.

McGonagall approached them as they entered. "Harry, Hermione... I am, not to put too fine a point on it, overjoyed to see that you made it out of there. But even more, I am completely amazed. What happened?"

Harry told the story as succinctly as he could, and enjoyed their stunned expressions when he demonstrated the rainbow shield he had used in the eighth room. "I feel like I should be surprised, too," he said, "but everything made so much sense that it just seems natural now. The energy of love makes it possible to use spells that weren't known before, and what I know now makes it possible to do anything that can be done by magic. Now, the challenge is going to be to find out exactly what that is. I have a feeling that in some cases, the main limitation will be my imagination."

McGonagall appeared speechless, as did all of the others, even Snape. Finally, she said, "Well, as Albus said after you came up with the Killing Curse shield, it is difficult to know what to say. 'Stunning' does not even begin to cover it. It definitely makes what you did worth it, even though Voldemort got away."

Harry smiled broadly, surprising the others again. "He's not getting away."

“He already did, Harry,” said Hugo somberly. “After you went into the fifth room—”

“I know,” Harry interrupted Hugo. “I mean, he’s as good as caught. Kingsley, would you get me some of that red stuff that Hermione put on him last year?”

Kingsley raised an eyebrow, then nodded and Disapparated. “So, I assume he came out after we went into the fifth room?” Hermione asked McGonagall.

McGonagall nodded. “It was shortly after I instructed you to move your hands and look at each other.” Harry felt the mental sensation Snape had once demonstrated, and understood that Snape was ‘tapping’ him. A glance at Hermione told him that Snape had done the same to her, and he held up a hand to stop McGonagall’s story as he and Hermione cast Legilimens.

Looking at the memory from Snape’s viewpoint, out of the shelter in the direction of the Ring, Harry saw Voldemort suddenly appear. Reacting quickly, Kingsley tapped his pendant and shouted, “Full alert! Everyone to the Ring!”

Wearing the same evil smile with which Harry was so familiar, Voldemort flipped a silver disc the size of a large coin toward the shelter. As Aurors started Apparating in, Ron, Pansy, Ginny, and Neville rushed out of the shelter to assist the Aurors. Voldemort then Disapparated, and the disc projected an image of him. The full complement of Aurors was present by the time the image spoke. As it started, Kingsley quickly directed ten Aurors to Diagon Alley, ten to Hogsmeade, and the rest to the Apparation detection room.

“None of you had enough influence with him to keep him from his folly, I see,” said Voldemort’s image smugly. “I did warn him. You are all fools for allowing him to think he ever had a chance, but at least you may now say goodbye to him before he dies. But you need not say goodbye to me, for I will see you all again. None of you will survive for another year; I will see to that personally. Fear not; most of your deaths will be quick and relatively painless... except for Parkinson, I believe I will allow Lucius to take his son’s revenge on you.” In the memory, Harry

saw Pansy's eyes widen in fear, and Ron put a protective arm around her shoulder. Harry remembered that at this point, they all thought he would die, which made Voldemort a far more real danger to them than he had been.

"And, of course, Snape," continued Voldemort, his expression turning from smugness to anger. "You will be made a living example of the price of betraying Lord Voldemort. You will live a long life... far longer than you will wish it to be. I strongly suggest that you take your own life now, or you will soon regret having missed the chance. You will see me soon." The image disappeared.

Harry raised his eyebrows slightly as he observed Snape's emotional state while viewing the memory; Snape was surprisingly undisturbed by Voldemort's threat, and Harry got the impression that Snape wished that Voldemort were speaking personally, so he could retort that he still believed that Harry would prevail. Harry now understood that Snape's belief in Harry's eventual victory had been genuine, not a posture to bolster Harry's spirits.

In the memory, those in the shelter exchanged uneasy glances. Standing next to Ginny, Neville raised his left hand; Ginny grabbed his wrist and pulled it down. "We do *not* tell them about this," she said emphatically, daring with her eyes anyone to contradict her. "The last thing they need is to think about this. They have to focus."

"Miss Weasley is correct, of course," agreed Snape. "Professor Potter's mental outlook is crucial to their chances of escaping the Ring, and it will suffer if he is made aware of this. Knowing this will not help them. They will find out when they reach the ninth room."

Harry's friends traded impressed looks. Eyebrows high, Kingsley repeated, "When?"

"When," repeated Snape. "The harder things are made for Professor Potter, the more he does. The Dark Lord will regret having challenged him in such a way." Harry saw Ginny give Snape a look of appreciation, which he felt Snape acknowledge with his eyes. A fleeting emotional impression just before the memory

ended told Harry that Snape sympathized with Ginny, and was glad that what he said lifted her spirits.

Hermione put down her wand. “He does love to gloat, doesn’t he,” she muttered.

Snape nodded. “As I have said, a weakness.”

Kingsley approached Harry with a jar of the red substance. It now occurred to Harry that he needed only a tiny amount, but he hadn’t specified to Kingsley how much he should bring. “He won’t be gloating for long,” said Harry as he opened the jar and put a very small amount onto his finger.

Confused, Ron asked, “How’s that going to help find him? We need relays, and he could be anywhere in the world.”

Happy that their difficulties would soon be over, Harry smiled again. “This is the part where the ‘anything that can be done by magic’ thing comes in handy. I might not have had this idea if I hadn’t seen the Room of Requirement come up with something like it.”

Suddenly next to him was an image of the Earth, much like the one of Hogwarts that the Room had created in December; the others appeared no less impressed than Neville had been at the time. Focusing on what had been absorbed into his finger, Harry concentrated, and suddenly there were ten red lights on the surface; eight closely concentrated in England, and two in Greenland, very close to each other.

“These two are Hermione and I,” explained Harry to his friends. “Hermione, I assume these are the researchers, and the people you tested it on?” he asked, pointing to the lights in England.

“Yes, but we can’t know that one isn’t Voldemort,” she said. “Any could be him. Can you tell the exact locations from the lights?”

“I can do better than that,” he said. “But first, let’s make sure one of those is him.” The image of the earth started to spin slowly, and soon they saw one more light. Harry knew the continent was South America, but had no idea of the location

beyond that. It didn't matter, of course, but Harry supposed he should learn more geography. I'm sure John would be happy to teach me, he thought with a wry smile.

"Brazil," said McGonagall. "The rain forest, I believe. It has to be him."

"Indeed," agreed Snape. "He had various hideaways all over the world, usually in remote locations. It will be a modest structure, made invisible to observers."

"Well, let's make sure it's him," said Harry. The image started changing; the South American continent became larger and larger, and they were looking at only a portion of the earth's surface rather than at the whole planet. The red dot remained at the center of the image; the effect reminded Harry of a camera zooming in. Above the planet at first, it zeroed in on the dot. Soon a jungle was visible from above, and as the 'camera' approached the ground, they could see a small structure, similar from the outside to the one they were in. The view zoomed through the ceiling, and they could suddenly see Voldemort, sitting in a chair, apparently deep in thought.

"This won't take long," said Harry as he prepared to Disapparate.

"Professor," said Snape sharply. He said nothing more, but Harry soon felt a memory being viewed: he saw Kingsley walking with Neville, in the Auror compound, toward where Bellatrix Lestrange was being held, last summer. Harry had not actually seen the memory; he realized that he had created the image in his mind's eye as he had been told the story, and Snape was showing him that. Harry immediately understood Snape's intent; it was a request to be taken along, and something Snape felt would help him, as Neville had been helped by his encounter with the powerless Lestrange.

Harry nodded to Snape. "Ready?"

"You must activate the anti-Disapparation field very quickly," advised Snape. "Since you developed the ability to render him unconscious, he decided that he would instantly Disapparate upon hearing the sound of any Apparation which he

was not expecting. You could find him again, of course, but it could quickly become tedious.”

“He won’t hear us coming,” said Harry, as he and Snape vanished and appeared a few feet away. His friends gaped yet again; he wondered how long it would take for them to become accustomed to his doing any magic he wanted. “This is pretty much what phoenixes do, so I figured I could do it too. No Apparation noise.” Looking at his friends again, he added, “We’ll be back soon.” Without a sound, they vanished again.

Harry and Snape appeared behind Voldemort, and Harry immediately put down the anti-Disapparation field. Were it Harry alone, he knew he would have just used the Imperius Charm immediately; he felt no need or desire to say anything to Voldemort, or to gloat at Voldemort’s downfall. After what had happened in the seventh room, his encounter with Dumbledore, Harry felt more calm and peaceful than usual; he absently wondered if that was because he could now do any spell he wanted, or because of the deep state of consciousness he had reached.

“My Lord,” said Snape, and Voldemort leaped from his chair, as startled as Harry had ever seen anyone. Voldemort turned, and shock registered on his face as he saw Harry.

“It cannot be,” said Voldemort in disbelief. Looking at Voldemort, Harry knew that Voldemort was sure that someone had adopted Harry’s appearance by using Polyjuice Potion. Then Harry felt the familiar sensation of Dark magic about to be used. Voldemort pointed his wand at Snape and shot a Killing Curse at him, but it was barely away from his wand when Harry’s rainbow shield went up; the Curse seemed to just disappear.

Snape smiled, clearly enjoying Voldemort’s astonishment. “It is my honor to again be in your presence, my Lord,” said Snape, his sarcasm subtle yet clear. “Please forgive me if I do not kiss your robe.”

Voldemort tried to Disapparate, and failed, which both Harry and Snape noted. “Less than an hour ago, you said you would see me soon,” continued Snape. “Do you now wish to leave so suddenly? There is so much we could discuss. Surely you have more ideas about how to eliminate Professor Potter.”

Fear now in his eyes, Voldemort started casting area-effect spells. The rainbow shield remained up, and Harry and Snape were unaffected. Snape gestured to the shield and said, “This is the spell which, naked and wandless, Professor Potter created in order to get past the eighth room of your Ring of Reduction, my Lord,” said Snape, with a sarcastic emphasis on the last two words. “It defends against any sort of magic, though I am sure that Professor Potter will not mind if you try.” Voldemort continued trying spells; Harry wondered if it was only because Voldemort couldn’t think of anything else to do.

Snape slowly walked around the chair to face Voldemort; Harry made sure Snape remained protected by the shield. Snape stared at Voldemort, saying nothing, taking in the fear and increasing panic in Voldemort’s eyes. “You will pay for this, Snape—”

Snape’s wand flashed, and he said “Crucio” almost casually. Voldemort collapsed and screamed, and continued screaming. Harry winced, but said nothing. He was acutely uncomfortable; he felt as though he were holding someone while another person beat them up. But Harry knew what Snape had been through, how much pain and suffering Voldemort’s presence in Snape’s life had caused him. Harry decided to let Snape do whatever he wanted to do.

Just as Harry had the thought, Snape stopped the spell. Voldemort looked like every other person who Harry had seen subjected to the Curse: shaking, gasping for breath, and very frightened. Snape bent to one knee and leaned over Voldemort. “I stopped for his sake, not for yours,” said Snape, gesturing at Harry. Contemptuously, he added, “You deserve exactly the sort of treatment you threatened me with an hour ago. Alas, it is not a just world. But I thought you should know what that feels like from the other side.”

Snape stood again, and cast Legilimens. “Your Occlumency skills seem to have declined, my Lord. You are weak, frightened, pathetic... stripped of your power, you have no more courage or fortitude than Wormtail. Having been so powerful, I suppose you never had to develop any.

“One more thing... his power is, in fact, love. That you could look at his memories and not understand that shows that the headmaster understood you better than you understood yourself. He also understood that there are indeed things worse than death, which you will be finding out very soon. His sacrifice ensured your defeat...” Snape glanced at Harry, then continued, “...and he knew the queen could be sacrificed, because there was a passed pawn which you could not stop.”

Snape was not smiling now, but Harry felt he had never seen Snape look so content; it was as if a long-held ambition was finally being realized, which Harry supposed was truly the case. Voldemort was still on the ground, unmoving, bewildered, seeming to have no idea what to do. Like a house-elf who’s lost his magic, thought Harry. This is what Snape wanted, to see Voldemort like this. He can remember him this way; weak and powerless, not the one who inspired awe, fear, and terror.

Snape spoke again. “Well, I believe that is all I have to say.” He bent to one knee again, his face less than a foot from Voldemort’s. “Goodbye, Voldemort.” He stood, and gestured to Harry that he was finished. Recovering from his momentary surprise at finally hearing Snape say the name, Harry applied the Imperius Charm, and Voldemort collapsed, unconscious.

Harry levitated Voldemort over to the bed in the corner of the room, and conjured a chair next to it. “This won’t take long, it’ll be much faster than it was with you.”

Snape nodded, clearly unconcerned with how long it would take. He gave Harry a look, one that after so much time with Snape, Harry had learned meant Snape had something important to say.

“Harry...” began Snape, and Harry realized that it would be very important indeed. With a very serious expression, Snape continued, “Thank you, both for making that possible, and for your indulgence. I know you did not enjoy that.”

Equally serious, Harry responded, “If anyone deserved to be able to do that, it was you. And I enjoyed it more than I would like to have.”

“But you would not have done it yourself, even given what you have suffered at his hands,” pointed out Snape. “You have nothing to feel badly about. And to borrow a phrase I have seen you and your friends use, I would go so far as to say that your reaction passes ‘the Dumbledore test.’”

Harry slowly nodded, pleased at the compliment. “Maybe. I have a feeling the others will agree with you. Anyway, thanks.” Harry sat, and began imprinting love on Voldemort’s mind.

CHAPTER 24

THE BOY WHO LIVED

Seven hours later, Rupert Wilmington greeted the six as they entered the Golden Dragon. “We are, of course, deeply honored to have you here,” he said to the group. “The wizarding world is greatly in your debt. I refer to all of you, not only the two professors. Please, follow me.”

As he led them to their table, applause started, and soon the whole restaurant was applauding. “See, I told you, those robes are a dead giveaway,” whispered Ron.

“People have always recognized me fine, no matter what I wear,” responded Harry. “Thank you,” he said to the diners, hoping to get them to stop applauding. “Thank you very much.” The clapping finally died down, and the group was seated at a relatively secluded table, near the one Harry and Ginny had sat at. Wilmington gave them menus, took their drink orders, and left them alone. Harry was glad that McGonagall had told the six that they were ‘at liberty,’ and needn’t report back to Hogwarts until Sunday evening.

“Well, it look like you’re going to have to get used to that, at least for a while,” Ron joked, referring to the applause. “Bet it happens in all your classes next week.”

“I suppose I’ll just have to deal with it.”

“Brave man,” said Ron encouragingly. “So, when do we get to see the memory in the Pensieve?”

“As soon as you’ve spent an hour walking around naked at the Burrow with Hermione and I there,” retorted Harry humorously.

Feigning nervousness, Ron said, “Umm, I’m not sure I want to see it quite that badly. How about just the parts where you have clothes on?”

“That, you can see,” allowed Harry.

“I don’t see the problem with the other thing, Ron,” teased Pansy. “You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Would you do it?” he challenged her.

She appeared to think about it seriously. “Probably, if it was everyone and not only me. It would sort of be out of respect for what they had to do. I’m sure that wasn’t easy.”

“No, it wasn’t,” agreed Harry. “But the link helped, don’t you think, Hermione?”

She nodded. To the others’ surprised looks, she explained, “It let us know what the other was feeling, and we could respond to that, help each other feel better about it. One thing about communicating that way is that you can’t lie. If Harry tried to send that he wasn’t embarrassed, but he was, I’d get the message that he was trying to send that he wasn’t embarrassed, but that he was.”

“There’s nothing that interesting to see in those rooms, anyway,” said Harry. “And a lot of the communicating we did was with the link, so you couldn’t hear it.”

“Say, Harry, about that robe,” said Ron, “you did put some clothes on under it, didn’t you? I mean, you don’t want to be in public when it just decides to vanish.”

Harry chuckled. “Well, I did just to be comfortable, but it’s not going to vanish.”

“I mean, eventually,” clarified Ron. “I know it won’t for a few days.”

“No, I mean, it won’t vanish. It’s here for good.”

Ron’s eyes went wide. “You can conjure things that’ll be permanent? But that’s... well, never mind. How do you know?”

Harry shrugged. “I just know.”

Ron became more excited at a sudden thought. “You could conjure Galleons!”

Harry tilted his head in a 'well, yes and no' gesture. "He can't, Ron," explained Hermione. "Well, technically he could, but it's an energy-of-love issue. He can't, because if he did it and used them, it would be like stealing."

Ron looked incredulous. "If he made them, how is it like stealing?"

"It has to do with economics," she said. "Basically, there's a certain amount of money around. If he started conjuring money and using it, there would be more money around, but the same amount of stuff to buy and sell, so prices would get higher. Essentially, the value of the money people had would decrease because of what he did. It would be like stealing, a tiny bit from everyone that had money. So, he can't do it."

Ron looked disappointed; Harry wondered whether Ron would have been willing to take Galleons from Harry that Harry had conjured. "There is something I can do, though," said Harry. He looked into his right hand for a minute, then reached across the table and handed Ron a gold coin.

Ron looked at it and laughed. One side had two broomsticks crossed, with a Golden Snitch between them; the other had the three Quidditch hoops. At the bottom of the coin was the year, followed by the initials 'R.W.' "My own commemorative coin," he said as he showed the others. "Thanks. But why did it take so long to conjure?"

"I had to do it three times to get it the way I wanted it," Harry explained. "Just because I can conjure anything doesn't mean I can conjure great artwork. I have to visualize exactly how I want it to look."

Wilmington returned to their table. "Excuse me for interrupting, but these just arrived, and we thought you might be interested in seeing them." He passed out six copies of the evening edition of the Prophet. Hermione thanked him, and he left again.

'Potter Defeats Voldemort,' the headline read. Ron read the first paragraph out loud: "In an awe-inspiring display of magical power, determination, and resourcefulness, Harry Potter, with the help of friend and fellow professor

Hermione Granger, broke through every obstacle in his path and finally captured Voldemort, rendering the evil Dark wizard permanently harmless and handing him over to the Aurors.”

“I don’t think he quite captures the impressiveness of what you two did,” said Ginny; Harry wondered how much of the comment was a joke.

“Wow... that’s what it looked like?” asked Pansy, looking at one of the pictures on the front page, which showed Harry and Hermione walking through the eighth room.

“Do you mean the shield, or the stuff coming down?” asked Hermione.

“Both, I guess,” said Pansy. “It’s an amazing picture. It’s so vivid, I can really imagine what you must have felt when you saw what was in the eighth room.”

Ron had opened the paper, which was eight pages long; the second through fifth pages had detailed descriptions of what had happened in each room, and pictures. “How did he get pictures?”

“I showed it to him in the Pensieve,” said Hermione. “He got the pictures from there.”

Ron raised his eyebrows. “Did he have to strip down?”

She smiled. “He offered to, mostly as a joke, because he knew I wouldn’t take him up on it. But he would’ve done it if I’d asked him to. I decided to make an exception for him. I asked Harry through the link; he wasn’t thrilled, but he understood the reason, and agreed. Hugo promised me that the pictures would be... appropriate, I guess. He said, “The Prophet is a family newspaper, after all.””

“Looks like he did a good job editing them,” agreed Ron. “In those rooms, it shows you pretty much from the shoulders up. The one from the fifth room has your expressions when you realize your clothes are gone.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t of us staring at each other,” joked Harry.

“There are two from the seventh room,” continued Ron, “one from behind, with your hands on her shoulders, doing the Apparating.” I’m glad it wasn’t of me looking down, Harry sent to Hermione. Her expression didn’t change, but he got

the impression of a laugh in response. “The other is from when you were trying to reach Albus.”

“There’s a paragraph about you and Ginny,” said Pansy to Neville, reading from the inside of the paper, “about how it was really difficult for you because you were both the way they communicated with the outside, and the ones with the most to lose. You’re described as ‘calm, but very concerned,’ and Ginny as ‘wearing her emotions on her sleeve.’ I guess that sounds fair. Flitwick certainly found that out.”

Neville and Ron laughed; Ginny managed an embarrassed smile. “He deserved it,” she said defensively. “He should have known better.”

Pansy explained it to Harry and Hermione. “This was something that happened when you were in the fifth room. Hermione, you asked whether it was possible to Disapparate out of a Ring of Reduction, and Flitwick said no, it wasn’t. Well, Ginny practically lost it, she screamed at him. ‘Are you crazy? You never tell Harry that he can’t do something! He might have been able to do it, for all we know!’ She was furious.”

“Mainly because I was so scared,” Ginny put in. “It looked like you were done for, for sure, and that seemed like a possible way out, but he took it away. I know he didn’t mean to, but I thought he knew enough not to do that.”

“The interesting thing,” continued Pansy, “is that nobody reprimanded Ginny for doing that, even though she screamed at a Head of House. I guess McGonagall really felt for her. Nobody said anything for a minute, then Snape said, ‘It is better not to suggest to Professor Potter that he cannot do a particular thing. He has shown himself to be highly... suggestible.’”

The others laughed, partly at the description of Harry, and partly at Pansy’s imitation of Snape’s voice. “You do a pretty good Snape,” said Ron, smiling.

“Thanks. Then, Flitwick kind of muttered, ‘Well, you can’t.’ McGonagall said, ‘One also could not block the Cruciatius Curse, or the Killing Curse, or render giants harmless, or—’ He just said, ‘All right, all right, you’ve made your point.’ I think he felt bad about it, even though he had given the right answer.

“Then, in the seventh room, Hermione asked about Apparating within a room. Flitwick looked surprised, then at Ginny, as if he was scared of her yelling at him again. He said, ‘Uh, well, I suppose I couldn’t say it’s impossible...’ Then Ginny said to you that yes, of course, you could do it. She gave Flitwick this look, like, that’s what you were supposed to say. He kind of shrugged and said, ‘You don’t really need me, then, do you?’ After you started doing it, he looked really surprised. He obviously thought it was impossible.”

“It’s kind of funny now, looking back on it,” said Ron, “but at the time, there was nothing funny about it. When you lost your wands, we all thought that was it.”

“Not Snape, though,” mused Harry. “At first, I wondered if he really thought that, or if he was just trying to keep me in the frame of mind that I could do it. Being so suggestible and all. But yes, I thought so too, though I tried to stay positive. Voldemort definitely thought so, since he spent a whole room to taunt me. You know, thinking about it later, I understood the first three rooms a bit better. The first room was the one with the best chance to kill us, but with an animal, there was some element of luck involved. The second and third weren’t that hard; he would have known we could do them. Now I understand the whole point was to make sure we couldn’t go back, that we’d have no choice but to go forward. If he’d made the fourth room like he made the eighth room, we’d have just gone back, or used the Time-Turner. He wanted to trap us before giving us something he was sure we couldn’t do. He expected the sixth or seventh rooms to kill us, but made the eighth that way just to be sure. That’s what Kingsley said, anyway.” Harry had talked to Kingsley a few hours before, after he’d received the report from the first Legilimens to go over Voldemort’s mind since he was captured. “Apparently he was absolutely sure we wouldn’t survive, and was really pleased with himself at what he’d come up with. He loved the fact that the deadliest artifact he had was one that a Death Eater bought in a shop for magical sex toys. He loved the irony of it.”

“There’s a whole shop devoted to that?” asked Ron in surprise. “And what was a Death Eater doing in it, anyway?”

“I asked about that. Kingsley said he thinks it was just a novelties shop, but that was just how Voldemort thought of it, because of the kind of artifact it was. Like what Fred and George have, only aimed more at adults. Funny how I was asking you earlier this year, Hermione, about whether there was anything that did that, and then it almost kills us.”

“Yes, I suppose there’s some irony in that, as well. But you can do that now, can’t you?” she asked, wearing a mischievous smile.

“I’ll let you know tomorrow,” said Ginny, also smiling, as the others chuckled.

“What would I do without you guys to make fun of me,” he said dryly.

“Considering how everyone else is going to be treating you for a while, you should count yourself lucky to have us to make fun of you,” said Pansy.

Wilmington came to their table with a tray containing cheese and crackers, and another with six drinks. As he handed Harry his, Wilmington gave him a wink, letting Harry know that he remembered what Harry had said the last time he was there.

After Wilmington left, Harry picked up his ale. He looked at his friends, reveling in the moment, and the fact that Voldemort was gone and his friends had all survived. He counted himself very lucky indeed. He lifted his glass. “To Albus,” he said.

“To Albus,” they repeated, and drank. There was a silence, as if they all wanted to enjoy the moment.

Harry remembered something he’d wanted to ask Ron. “Ron, what’s a ‘passed pawn’? It’s something that Snape mentioned just before he was finished with Voldemort.”

Ron asked the context, and Harry related what had been said. Ron’s eyebrows went high. “That’s probably the best compliment you’re ever going to

hear from him. I assume you all know that if a pawn reaches the eighth rank, the other side of the board, it can become a queen,” he explained to the whole table. “A passed pawn is one that’s on the sixth or seventh rank, that’s threatening to advance and become a queen, or is very likely to at some point. Snape was saying that if Dumbledore was a queen in this chess game, you were a passed pawn—that you would become a queen. Basically, that you would replace Dumbledore, that you would be like he was.”

Harry felt that he would normally be embarrassed at hearing such a thing, but he felt more touched than embarrassed. No doubt having received his feelings, Hermione said, “Yes, you would usually be embarrassed, but you know that Snape knows you better than almost anyone, and he knew Dumbledore intimately. If anyone’s in a position to say that, it’s him. And you know he wouldn’t say it unless he really thought it.”

Harry nodded. He found that, for those reasons, it meant more coming from Snape than it had from anyone who had made the comparison before. It was the first time he didn’t dismiss the idea out of hand.

* * * * *

“You know another thing that’s great about this?” Harry asked Ginny four hours later, as they lay in the bed in Harry’s quarters, getting ready to sleep. “I don’t have to do Occlumency before bed anymore.”

“That’ll be nice,” she agreed. “Especially since it means that I can talk to you anytime, if you’re still awake. I don’t have to worry about ruining its effect.”

“All that time, something I had to do every day because of him,” said Harry. “It’s like this big change in my life. I remember telling Archibald last September that I just wanted a normal, boring life. Now it looks like I’ll actually get it.”

“No one deserves it more,” she said, moving in for a kiss. “Now at least if you don’t go out in public, it won’t be because of the danger.”

“Just not wanting to be bothered,” he agreed.

“Today was pretty unusual, though,” she pointed out. “People aren’t always going to be like that.” On their way from the Diagon Alley fireplace earlier that evening, they had stopped at Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes. Along the way, many people had approached Harry and greeted him, thanked him, and shook his hand; he had received a half-dozen kisses from women of various ages, to Ginny’s great amusement.

“I certainly hope not,” he said. “But I felt like I could enjoy it a little bit, more than usual. I’m not sure why, maybe I felt like I actually deserved it this time.”

“I’m glad. You definitely deserved it,” she said emphatically. “You know this is going to last a while, a lot of people are going to want to get in touch with you. You should try your best to be tolerant of it.”

“I’ll try. I hope Hermione gets a lot of the credit too, though. She really deserves it.”

“If I’d gone with you instead of her, like I wanted to, we’d both probably be dead,” agreed Ginny. “On the other hand, the fifth room wouldn’t have been such a big issue.”

Harry chuckled. “That’s one way to put it. It would’ve been hard to get used to, if the situation hadn’t been so bad. I’m not sure if the fact that we’re such good friends made it easier or more difficult.”

With a teasing smile, she said, “So, if you had to compare...”

“I am *not* going to compare,” he said firmly. “There’s just no...” He trailed off and chuckled; Ginny asked without words what he was laughing at. “I accidentally sent what I was feeling,” he explained. “She sent, tell her it’s her, you idiot. Don’t worry about hurting my feelings, and it’s the truth anyway. If Neville asks, I’ll tell him it’s him, and it’ll be the truth also.”

Ginny smiled. “She knows what to say better than you do, you’ll probably be calling her for help when we have fights. So, is this like it was when it was through the phoenixes? You don’t send words, just feelings?”

He nodded. “If we’re telling another person, we translate them into words, like I just did.”

“And how did you ‘accidentally’ send what you did just now?”

“When we have a strong reaction to something, it’s more likely that the other person will know about it without it deliberately being sent, which is also the case for how bonded phoenixes, like Flora and Fawkes, are with each other. I had a strong reaction because I didn’t want to answer your question, I was afraid it would make her feel bad. It didn’t occur to me that she’d feel it anyway.”

“So, you have with Hermione the same kind of communication that phoenixes have when bonded to people, or to each other. But Fawkes and Flora know that you and Hermione aren’t married, or partners, right?”

“Yes, that’s the kind of thing they can know,” he said. “They wouldn’t have suggested it if our lives hadn’t depended on it.”

She gave him a serious look. “It’s all right. I’m not trying to be critical, or to give you a hard time. I know there was no choice, and I know you’re worried about how this is going to affect me.” She sat up in the bed, and took his hand. “I just don’t know. So far it really doesn’t bother me. Maybe it’s because I thought for sure I was going to lose you, and I’m deliriously happy I still have you, much happier than I am that Voldemort is defeated. All I can say for now is, we’ll just have to see how it goes. If it causes problems, we’ll deal with them as best we can. Let me ask you, does it disturb you that this is permanent? Or is that something you shouldn’t think about because it might upset her if the answer is yes?”

“First of all, it’s starting to occur to me that I’m not going to have many secrets from her. It’s not like she’s going to know my every feeling, of course, and we may get better at not sending things accidentally. But I feel like just having the idea of wanting to keep something secret from her makes it more likely that I’ll accidentally send it.

“About your first question, no, it doesn’t really disturb me. The only thing that disturbs me at all is the idea that it might cause problems between you and me.

I think she and I both have to adjust to it too, a bit.” He paused, then added, “She says, yes, we really do. She’s trying to have a conversation with Neville, and because you and I are talking about this, she keeps getting stuff from me, and it’s distracting.”

Ginny smiled. “Tell her to tell Neville that we’re sorry, and we’ll go to a different topic.”

“Neville says, don’t be silly, you should talk about what you want. Maybe Hermione and I should be talking about it.”

“Did Hermione send her own feelings with that, or was it just Neville’s answer?”

“Her mood comes through with what she sends,” said Harry. “She thinks it’s... I don’t know if there’s a word for it, sort of funny and nice, a little of each. One interesting thing about communicating like this is that you realize that when we speak, when we say we feel some way, sometimes it’s not exactly right, it’s just the closest word we could think of.”

“I know what you mean,” she agreed, lying down on the bed and putting an arm around him. “It’s like, when I say that I adore you, and that I’m incredibly happy to have you... it’s not exactly what I mean, but it’s as close as words can come.”

Happiness flooded through him as he held her. “I’ve had the exact same feeling.”

They kissed. Then, with a gleam in her eye, she asked, “Did she get that?”

“Loud and clear,” he reported. “She says that now she knows how the phoenixes feel. One of the things they like about being bonded to humans is when we feel like that, they get to feel it too. She’s happy we love each other so much.”

“So am I,” she said, and kissed him again. “Now, how about that spell that we talked about at dinner?”

He smiled, and turned the light out with a wave of his hand. Seconds later, he heard a sigh of mock annoyance. “I meant you, not me.”

Another pause. “That’s better.”

In the phoenix place, Harry happily embraced Dumbledore. “That was a very nice toast earlier,” Dumbledore joked as he let go of Harry.

“Well, you deserved it,” said Harry as they sat by the stream. “You saved me, you saved us, you helped stop Voldemort from coming back.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “I know this will come as quite a surprise to you, but I was not the one who spoke to you today.”

Harry blinked; surely he’d misheard. “What?”

“I was not the one who said the words you heard earlier, when you were trying to reach me,” repeated Dumbledore patiently.

Baffled, Harry was sure there was some miscommunication. “Of course it was you, I saw you, I heard you.”

“It was an image, since I do not exist in physical form; my current appearance may cause you to forget that from time to time. But it was not me.”

“If it wasn’t you, then... who was it?”

“Peculiar as it will sound, it was you.” Again, Harry was sure he’d heard incorrectly. “Not you in the sense you normally think of yourself,” explained Dumbledore. “I have explained before that the consciousness in which you normally exist is but a part of your whole... entity, one could say. There are other, more spiritually based, parts of your... soul, but again, words are imprecise in matters such as this. There is a greater entity, which is you; your waking consciousness, which you think of as you, is only a part of you, the part that operates in the physical world. The part of you that is spiritually based—some refer to it as the ‘higher self’, let us use this term for the sake of simplicity—has a great deal of knowledge which is not normally accessible to your waking consciousness. In reaching the state that you did, you were able to access it.

“Your higher self helped you assemble the memories you saw. Only in a state of deep relaxation and focus did you see the connections, and your higher self

provided the final insight which put it all together. As you pointed out immediately afterwards, the clues had been there all along, though even if you had put them together before, you would not have accepted the conclusion they led to. Your normal waking consciousness believed what it had been told about what was possible and what was not; a moment of great clarity was required to convince you otherwise.”

Harry had been listening with great interest. “It really was amazing how everything fit together. And you’re right, even though it did fit, I wouldn’t have believed it. But then... if that was me, or a part of me, why did it look like you?”

“I cannot say for certain,” said Dumbledore. “The likeliest answer is that my appearance was given because it was I that you were seeking. The other possibility is that it was because you knew that you would be more inclined to accept the information if you believed that it came from me.”

“You mean... that my higher self did the same thing that Ginny did—say that something came from you when it really didn’t, so I would believe it?”

“It may have,” said Dumbledore with amusement. “We cannot know, of course.”

He shook his head in amazement, then chuckled. “Ginny will love this, when I tell her. She’ll probably say it means she’s in tune with my higher self. Well, at least it’s done, Voldemort’s gone. But let me ask you... like the part of Professor Snape that stayed here for all those years, there’s a part of Voldemort—maybe we can just say that it was Voldemort, since I think of Voldemort as being the ‘pure evil’ part—that couldn’t stay in that mind after I did what I did. So, what happened to it? Did it die? Did it come up here, to move on to the next place? Can it do that?”

“That is a difficult question to answer. However, there is no particular time by which you must wake up tomorrow, so I will take whatever time is necessary to answer. This will involve concepts for which there are no precise language equivalents, but I will do my best.

“Tom Riddle was inhabited by... a malevolent entity, let us say for now. It did not take him over; he welcomed it, accepted it by choice. He was already powerful, but it made him more powerful than he had been or ever would be, by giving him ambition and focus. This entity is what you drove out, never to return.

“The nature of this entity is difficult to explain; some background is required. As I have said before, good and evil do not exist as such, universally speaking. It is more accurate to say that there is love, and there is... we could say fear, or ignorance. Ignorance in this context simply refers to a total lack of understanding of love; fear has roughly the same meaning. In the spiritual realm, there is only love; in the physical realm, there is both love and fear. There is a great deal of love in the world, and a great deal of fear; almost everyone experiences both at times throughout their life. Love is very strong in some, fear in others. There is a spectrum, with more people in the middle than near either end of it. It is humanity’s journey, the journey of all physical beings, to progress from a state of fear and ignorance to a state of love.

“We are highly creative beings, and we can create fear as well as love. The malevolent entity of which I spoke could be considered to have been created by our mass consciousness, by an accumulation of human fear. It does not know love; it cannot imagine that such a thing exists. It knows only fear, a total lack of love—what most people would call ‘evil.’ Since there is plenty of fear in the world, it will always find a home, a being willing to accept it and what it offers. Tom Riddle experienced a great deal of pain and fear in his early life, and sought power as a way to be in control. He made a fateful decision at a young age—a decision to embrace the entity which made itself known as Voldemort.”

Harry often had difficulty following Dumbledore when he spoke about spiritual matters, but he understood this well enough. “So, this entity... it didn’t die, because it doesn’t have a physical body?”

“It did not die, because there is still fear in the world, which created it and supports it,” said Dumbledore. “Thousands of years from now, or however long it

takes humanity to evolve to its destiny—a complete understanding of love, and the nature of existence—this entity and others like it will no longer be supported, because no one will be creating it with their fears. As love grows, it will become weaker and weaker. But no, in the here and now, it did not die. It will simply look for a new host, someone who wishes to embrace what it will offer, and give themselves to it.”

“Then, did I really accomplish anything?” asked Harry, suddenly dispirited. “If it’s just going to go find someone else?”

“You accomplished a great deal,” Dumbledore assured him. “The reason it chose Tom Riddle is that he was the strongest and most talented wizard of his generation. Such an entity will always seek the being which gives it the greatest potential for power. You have deprived this being of the best home it could possibly have. It will find another, but very likely someone not nearly as powerful, or capable of as much damage. By defeating it, you have also secured an increase in the potential for love in your community. Such entities feed on the damage they cause, as Bellatrix Lestrange tried to do to you when she provoked you two years ago. They wish to create more fear, to make themselves stronger. Had he gained power, Voldemort could have created a great deal of fear, by ruining people’s lives with violence and terror. The only true way to fight fear is with love, which is what you have done. You will continue to spread that message.”

Dumbledore’s last seven words sounded very right, and gave him a flash of understanding about his future. “It sounds like a good way to spend a life.”

“A very good way,” agreed Dumbledore. “Be aware, Voldemort’s defeat and your newfound magical abilities will not guarantee you an easy and stress-free existence. You will be the most prominent person in wizarding society. That you will be so different from others will cause its own problems. Some will envy your abilities and seek to create difficulties for you, difficulties that cannot be easily fixed with magic. You will still have challenges; they will simply be different, and less intense, than those which you have experienced until now.”

“I understand,” said Harry. “I see your point... I guess I just feel right now, like, anything’s bound to be easy, compared to what I’ve just been through.”

“Very understandable, of course,” said Dumbledore. His expression becoming more somber, he added, “On another matter, I would like to apologize for whatever part I played in your childhood having been as trying as it was. I know that I do bear some responsibility for that.”

Puzzled for a moment, Harry finally realized what Dumbledore was talking about. “Do you mean that stuff that Sirius said?”

“It was not truly Sirius, of course,” Dumbledore reminded him. “It was your mind, supplying your worst fears. Most had to do with you, the responsibility you felt for the dead in the struggle against Voldemort, but that part had to do with me.”

Harry jumped in before Dumbledore could continue. “I don’t really think that. I don’t blame you for that.”

“Some part of you does, Harry,” said Dumbledore gently. “If that were not so, that ‘Sirius’ would not have said what he did. You see similarities between how I treated you and him; you feel that with both of you, too much attention was paid to your safety and not enough to your mental and emotional well-being. I am aware that you understand both sides of that situation, and ‘Sirius’ only discussed one side. I was not planning to go into detail in defense of my actions; you already know my reasons for what I did, and they must stand or fall on their own. I am aware that I could have taken greater risks, which would have led to a happier childhood for you had they paid off. But as you know, I chose to err on the side of caution. I also misread the Dursleys; I did not expect that they would treat you like their own son, but I did not think they would treat you nearly as poorly as they did. Had I known... I cannot say with certainty what choice I would have made, but it would have been more difficult.

“I also wish to say that I am pleased and flattered by two indications of your regard for me which we have discussed tonight. That you would unconsciously

choose my image to provide information which it was crucial that you accepted... and that seeing me in such a negative light would count as one of your worst fears, sufficient to cause it to be brought forth by the artifact in the sixth room.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” admitted Harry.

“By the way, we have a visitor,” said Dumbledore. Harry looked up and, to his great surprise, saw Blaise.

“Blaise! What are you doing... oh, have you decided to move on?”

Blaise nodded. “I’ve spent some time talking to Albus. I wish I’d gotten to do that more while I was alive, it would’ve been helpful. I realized that there wasn’t much point in staying around. But Albus said you would be here, and I just wanted to say goodbye, and thanks for trying to help me. It was hard for me to tell you, but I appreciated it.”

Harry couldn’t think of anything to say in response. He stood and hugged Blaise, then simply said, “Goodbye, Blaise.”

Blaise gave Harry a small smile. “Please say thanks, and goodbye, to Neville for me.” He was suddenly gone.

Harry resumed his seat next to Dumbledore, who said, “Keep in mind that in this place, thoughts can be known without the need for words. Blaise knew what you would have liked to say, even if you could not find the words.”

“I’m glad. But I’m wondering, why did he decide to leave now? It seems like a real coincidence, the day after Voldemort is defeated.”

“It is no coincidence, of course,” said Dumbledore. “I said before that some stay as ghosts because they feel they have unfinished business. Blaise himself was not sure why he had stayed, but after you defeated Voldemort, he suddenly understood the reason. He simply wanted to see what would happen.”

“Is that a common reason for staying?”

“No, it is not. In a way, this is connected to what we were talking about earlier, about the effect of fear and ignorance in a society. The more power is in the hands of what the wizarding world calls Dark forces, the more people suffer. Some

suffer by losing loved ones. Blaise suffered in a different way, by being constantly exposed to those strongly influenced by fear and ignorance. His character made him particularly vulnerable, and he suffered greatly because of it.

“I believe that when he died, he looked back and wondered what the point of it was. He felt that he never really had a chance, and in a way, that was true. This is the influence that beings like Voldemort have, to cause suffering in many different ways. This is the cancer that would have spread over wizarding society had you not stopped it. You and those who have supported you have prevented many others from suffering Blaise’s fate.

“In any case, Blaise eventually recognized the source of his difficulties, that he had been caught up in the path of evil. He stayed because he felt a compulsion to know the result, how the struggle that destroyed him would end. It has ended; he is content, and so has moved on.”

Harry shook his head sadly. “I just feel bad that his life was like it was.”

“He will have other lives,” Dumbledore assured Harry, “in which his circumstances will be far better. We all live many lives, with a variety of experiences.”

Dumbledore’s last sentence reminded Harry of something he’d rather not have thought of. “And now that Voldemort is gone, your purpose for being here is done. You’ll be moving on, too.”

“Yes, but not completely. It will be gradual, as I explained last June. I will see you again in a week, then a month, then three months, then a year, and so forth. Perhaps a few dozen times over the remainder of your physical life. The last time I see you, you may well appear as old as I do now. But I will accelerate my perception of time, so that no time will seem to pass to me in between visits. To me, it will be no more than a day or two.”

“I’m glad,” said Harry. “It’s nice to know that you’ll still be around, even if I won’t get to talk to you so much.” He stood, and so did Dumbledore. “Thank you so much for doing this, Albus. It’s meant so much to me. Like I said to Ginny

before bed, I don't have the words to tell you how I feel about you. But I know that you know.”

“Indeed I do,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “I will see you again, soon.” The phoenix place dissolved, and Harry was asleep again.

Harry enjoyed the day on Sunday, which it seemed to him was over far too quickly. He and Ginny made a trip into Diagon Alley, and at Ginny's request, he made a conscious effort to enjoy and appreciate the reactions he got. He wanted to wear the rainbow robes, but knew they would make him far more conspicuous than he already was. The next time they went, Harry said, he would create a spell that caused passersby to think his face was that of someone they didn't know, and leave him alone.

Bright talked to Harry the day after Voldemort's defeat, first having some fun at Harry's expense by pretending to take seriously a proposal to put up a statue of Harry in Diagon Alley. Harry suggested that if someone was so keen to put up a statue, they should put up one honoring the people who were killed by Voldemort or the Death Eaters. Bright said he'd mention the idea the next time the subject came up. He also told Harry that the ARA would be rescinded within the next week, which would not affect any other Hogwarts students, but would mean that Harry could soon Apparate anywhere he chose.

Upon returning to Hogwarts, Harry was greeted with applause first in the Gryffindor common room on Sunday night, then by all students in the Great Hall when he showed up for breakfast on Monday morning. To his surprise, he was then applauded by both of his first-year classes, all of whom had surely joined in the Great Hall applause, he thought.

Harry and Hermione walked into the staff room after lunch. They got hugs from Sprout and a few handshakes from the rest of the staff, but no round of applause, for which he was grateful.

“So, Hermione,” asked Sprout casually, “what's Harry feeling right now?”

Hermione laughed as Harry thought, ah, they're going to tease me about the link. I knew it had to be something. "He figures you're going to tease him, he just doesn't know about what. And he's happy that no one applauded."

Snape and McGonagall exchanged a glance. "So, now he expects applause every time he walks into a room," observed McGonagall.

"Quite an ego he's developing," agreed Snape. Harry grinned, since this was the first time Snape had ever teased him in the staff room. Come on, help me out, he sent to Hermione.

"Well, it's understandable. It's happened four times since he got back last night," she said, as she sent the message, I'm not always going to do this, just this time. "I should know, I get a burst of embarrassment every time it happens."

The teachers chuckled. "I suppose you've had a lot of that over the past two days," said Sprout. "How is that link working out? It sounds fascinating."

"It... takes some getting used to," said Hermione with what Harry thought was great understatement. "It's strange, often feeling emotions that aren't your own. I'd get it sometimes from Flora, of course, but phoenixes are less emotional than people. I've told Harry I think I have the better end of this, considering how emotional I can be. He'll have to put up with my feelings coming through all the time." She paused, then chuckled. "Now he's sending that he doesn't agree with that, but at least a good point is that I won't do things to try to embarrass him, since I'll feel it too. Although he realizes that it tends to be Ginny and Pansy who do that to him, not me. As for me, I'm going to see if I can work on helping him not be embarrassed so easily, since I'll be getting it all the time."

"See, I told you I didn't have the better deal," he pointed out humorously.

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you, when you start crying for no reason," she joked.

"That's not really going to happen, though, is it?" asked Sprout.

"No, it isn't," said Hermione. "We won't confuse each other's feelings for our own. It's strange, but at least we had some time to get used to the idea when

Fawkes and Flora were sending things back and forth. This is just a more intense version of that. But like you said, it is fascinating, since it's a type of communication that humans usually can't do. It makes me wonder how our lives would be different if everyone could communicate like this."

"You could write a term paper about it, if Hogwarts had a sociology class," commented John. "But you may actually want to consider writing a scholarly article about it. I have a feeling the International Wizarding Journal would be interested in it, if it covered both your actual situation and your thoughts on what it would mean on a wider scale." Seeing Harry's blank look, he added, "It's a monthly journal that's published worldwide, very serious. It's roughly the equivalent of a Muggle medical or law journal."

"See, that's another interesting thing about this," said Hermione enthusiastically. "As soon as you mentioned it, I figured Harry wouldn't have heard of it, and I thought of sending him an explanation, like the one you just gave. But that's not the kind of information that we can send, because it's so... factual."

"That makes me wonder, Harry," said Dentus, "I've been told that you're uncertain whether your new ability can be taught. Can't you teach it to Hermione, just by sending it? Or is that information you can't send?"

Interesting question, thought Harry. "The problem is, it's not so much information as it is... just knowing. It's hard to explain. I'm pretty sure that part of what's required to know it is the sort of spiritual stuff that Albus has been telling me for the past year. If I hadn't known all that, been really sure of it, one of the pieces of the puzzle would have been missing. Having Albus tell me about that, directly from where he was, is pretty different from me telling Hermione through the link. But I don't want to say that I can't do it, because I just don't know. I don't have the impression that sending is going to do any more good than speaking."

"Do you mean, then, that you do not think this is teachable?" asked McGonagall.

Uncertain, Harry thought for a minute. “If there’s one thing I learned from what happened, it’s never to think that something is impossible. But right now, I don’t know how I would do it. It feels like the kind of thing you have to... like I said, just know, and I think I could tell people, but they couldn’t change their beliefs so quickly. Maybe we need to work on helping people focus as much as I was, but even there, I was only able to do that because of Hermione helping me through our link, and that’s unique to us two. We’ll just have to see what happens. One thing I do think is that only people who can use the energy of love are going to have any chance at this.”

“I do see your point,” said a resigned McGonagall. “Well, we will have time to consider this in the future. As with many other things, I suspect your intuition will guide you in this.”

“Also, I think if I was going to get it from him through the link, I’d have gotten it when it happened,” added Hermione. “I was getting some of his images and feelings, and I got this... I can’t describe it, this amazing feeling when it all came together for him. But I only got the feeling, not the information. I knew something huge had happened, I just didn’t know what it was. Some things just can’t be sent, and I think that was one of them.”

Feigning irritation, McGonagall said, “By the way, Harry, do you realize how many changes will have to be made to the Hogwarts curriculum because of this?”

“Fortunately, Potions should remain unaffected,” said Snape in the same vein.

Harry smiled at the compliments. “I only wish that was the case. It would be great if everyone could do this.”

“I’m wondering, Harry,” asked Sprout, “does what you discovered explain why your magic worked in spite of the lutas, and the Four Corners artifact? Is there some fundamental difference between energy-of-love magic and normal magic?”

Harry hadn’t thought about that since his revelation, but discovered that he knew the answer anyway. “Yes, it’s kind of like... energy-of-love magic is kind of a

more pure form of magic. Wizards have the ability to do magic, but they're not using magic to its fullest potential. Magic is, basically, tapping into the creative ability that's provided by the spiritual realm. Focusing on love creates a kind of a shortcut, or a bridge, to the spiritual realm. When you're properly focused on love, that energy is more pure, or concentrated, so it overcomes the effect of things like *lutas*. Of course, this is why phoenixes aren't affected by *lutas*—their natural magic is very much like the energy of love, which makes sense because they're such calm and peaceful creatures. And it explains why they'd be especially attracted to humans who can use the energy of love, since it's a state that's a lot like their own."

Very impressed, Sprout nodded her understanding. "I can see where that makes sense. In all seriousness, I think that what you just said would be the basis of an excellent article for the *International Journal of Wizardry*; perhaps Hermione could help you with it. People should be able to read about this, in a more lengthy and detailed way than the Prophet would allow. And just for me personally, you can count me as officially interested in learning the energy of love. If you start any new classes for adults, like you're doing with the Aurors, I'd like to join."

Pleased that a teacher had finally made such a request, Harry nodded. "I'll keep it in mind, I promise."

The staff room was silent for a few seconds. Dentus said, "It's ironic that you used that power to defeat Voldemort, and that's exactly the power he always lusted after, would have used to rule the world if he could have gotten it."

"In that case," responded Harry, "it's even more ironic that no one could use this power to rule the world, because as soon as whoever had it decided to use it that way, it would go away. You have to understand the spiritual part to use it, and part of the spiritual part is that people have to have free will. Or, as Albus always said, 'we all must make our own decisions.' Even if someone decided they wanted to take over the world with the best intentions, to make it a peaceful paradise, they'd lose the ability to do it, because they'd be interfering with people's ability to make their choices."

“Why is that so important?” wondered Sprout.

“Well, first of all, remember that Albus talked to me for a half hour a night, almost every night, for almost a year. This was one of his big themes, but for me, it goes all the way back to my second year, after I went into the Chamber of Secrets. ‘Our choices define who we are,’ he said then. He said at night that we have to make choices to learn, and learning is why we’re here. Apparently, spiritually speaking, the fact that we have free will is incredibly important. This power can’t be used to take that away.”

“There are still things you could do, though,” suggested Sprout. “You can conjure permanent things, which you could do good with without taking over. If you wanted to, you could conjure raw materials, food, energy supplies, in huge quantities, helping people who are homeless and hungry. You could probably single-handedly do a lot to clean up the environment that the Muggles have ruined...” She trailed off as Harry shook his head. Confused, she said, “Why not? I thought you could do anything that could be done by magic. Those things could be done.”

“I wish I could,” said Harry sadly. “I’d love to. But I’m pretty sure I can’t do anything that would have that big an impact. I mean, not that I can’t, but I shouldn’t.”

Sprout and a few other teachers still looked confused; Harry was about to explain when, to his surprise, Snape did. “The situations which you would have Professor Potter remedy are those caused by collective choice, the result of millions of individual choices. If it were collectively wished, no one would starve or be without shelter, the environment could be protected. A vital part of free will is the freedom to make poor choices; those choices are effectively nullified if their consequences are removed.” Snape certainly knows the bit about poor choices from personal experience, Harry noted through the link; Hermione sent her agreement, and noted that Snape had known Dumbledore’s mind intimately, so he would understand this kind of thing better. Harry reflected that he had removed the long-

term consequences of Snape's poor choice, but not before Snape had proved his desire to make new choices, many times over.

"But the people who are starving and homeless didn't choose to be that way," protested Sprout, looking at Snape as though he were being callous and indifferent.

"Unfortunately, he is right, Pomona," said McGonagall. "No, they did not individually make that choice, but that is part of the Muggle community's collective choice. As Professor Snape said, they have more than ample resources to deal with the problems if they truly wished to. If Harry created huge amounts of resources for the purpose, they would simply devote less to it. Not to mention, of course, that it would shatter wizarding secrecy. Alas, it seems that while Harry has discovered a source of staggering power, there are many restrictions on how he can use it."

There was another silence as everyone digested McGonagall's point. Then Sprout asked, "Well, what about on a small scale? Suppose some poor wizard, maybe who just lost his home in a fire, comes up to Harry and asks him to conjure him a few dozen Galleons. Can he do that?"

"Well, I can't be conjuring Galleons in the first place," said Harry; he then gestured to Hermione, who told the teachers what she'd told him about the topic.

Dentus shook his head. "I don't think that's quite right, Hermione. If it were paper money, like British pounds, then you'd be right. But Galleons are actual gold; wizarding money is worth almost exactly what it would be worth if it were melted down. So there would be more Galleons in circulation, but they could be melted down and traded for Muggle money and resources. They have intrinsic value, in a way Muggle paper money doesn't. Now, you can make the same argument about Muggles that you just did, but consider the fact that Muggles mine for gold all the time. They're essentially creating new resources; they're just finding it, rather than literally creating it, as Harry could do. Why, then, is that not wrong? Granted, if he created enormous amounts of gold, he could drive world gold prices

down. But a few Galleons here and there, or even a thousand Galleons here and there, seems utterly defensible.”

Harry was about to point out that he didn't need more money, then he realized that it was more the theory than the practice that was being discussed. “Perhaps,” said McGonagall, “but one could argue that if a thing is wrong on a large scale, it is wrong on a small scale.”

“I'm not even sure that it would be ‘wrong’ if the price of gold was cut in half,” argued Dentus. “Who's to say that one value for gold is right, and another isn't? Granted, since the wizarding economy is based on gold, it would affect our purchasing power vis-à-vis Muggles, but that could be compensated for. I'm not saying that I advocate Harry producing millions of Galleons, of course. I'm just saying that even on a large scale, the impact is less than clear, so there should be no small-scale problems.”

“Perhaps Harry should sit down with an economist and an ethicist, and work it out,” said McGonagall half-seriously. “In the meantime, I suppose he will just have to do what he feels is right.”

“I must say, Harry,” said Dentus, “that if I were you, I'm not sure I'd let it be known that you can conjure permanent items. Enough people are going to be wanting a piece of you as it is. If everyone knew, half the people you ran into in public would ask you to conjure something for them, and they might not understand the kind of reasons not to that we've been discussing. People might think you were being selfish, not to share your good fortune with everyone when it would be so easy for you to do so.”

Sprout looked at Harry sympathetically, then said to Dentus, “I don't have to be linked to Harry, Archibald, to know that you just gave him a good scare. It's not as though he needs more people stopping him in the street.”

“Yes, but now I can at least control that if I want to,” said Harry. “One spell I've discovered I can do makes people in public think I'm just some average person, so I can walk through Diagon Alley and not be bothered. As for the conjuring

thing, I'm not sure I'd feel right about hiding something like that. I feel as though people should know what this can do, since I hope other wizards will be able to learn to do it. Hugo said he wants to do a follow-up article in which he gives more detailed information about what I can do; I said we should put it off for a bit while I find out what it is. Maybe if I explain it then, and at the same time explain why I can't run around doing it all the time, people will understand."

The teachers exchanged doubtful looks. "No doubt some will," said Dentus, "but the... spiritual dimension of this isn't easy to understand. I think what it may come down to is people simply taking your word for it. Even so, I guarantee you that there will be a substantial number who won't understand, who won't look past the words 'can conjure permanent items.' And a certain number of those will be in the Ministry. It may not happen soon, because your standing is so high right now, but there will come a point when resources are needed to do something, and some politician will suggest that you conjure the resources to do it. The first one will probably be very reasonable, but it'll be the foot in the door. If you start, they'll ask more and more. Everyone wants to get something for nothing, politicians most of all, and they're in a position to make your life less than pleasant if you don't do something popular that they ask you to do. Seriously, Harry, the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that you shouldn't make this public unless there's a compelling reason to do so. As it is, some people will be jealous of your ability, not understanding the spiritual part of it. If they know about this... I can think of many ways it could be distorted, made to make you look selfish, arrogant, and so forth."

Harry sighed, then said, "Well, that's all pretty depressing. I don't suppose anyone here disagrees with Archibald?" After a few seconds of silence, Harry nodded unhappily. "Didn't think so. Okay, I suppose you've convinced me." I bet Albus would have let it be known, Harry sent to Hermione. He'd have just dealt with the consequences.

Not at age seventeen, she sent back. Give yourself a break, give yourself a chance to get used to it. You can always change your mind later if you really want to. We don't know what Albus would have done, anyway. If he thought it was best not to say anything, he wouldn't have. And we who care about you don't want you to be a public target.

Harry sent his acknowledgment through the link, and his appreciation for her concern. As Sprout asked Hermione about what had happened to her since going into the Ring, Harry's thoughts drifted. He wondered what Dumbledore would have done, and realized with sadness that it wouldn't be so easy to ask him from now on.

* * * * *

On Saturday morning, he walked out to the Quidditch pitch with the rest of the team for the last match of the year; the day's match would be against Hufflepuff. There was no tension, as they had already more or less clinched the Quidditch Cup, and Harry felt a kind of nostalgia, knowing it would be his last time on the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch as a player. He imagined himself thirty years in the future, saying to students, "I used to be a Seeker, you know." It seemed like a very sad thought. As he walked, he got a message from Hermione: Look at it this way, you may not be able to play Quidditch then, but you'll be able to sleep in the same bed as Ginny every night. The thought cheered him up considerably, and he sent his thanks. He realized, too, that he would be able to play friendly matches with other former Hogwarts students; he was sure that Ron would look into it after they graduated.

Their match would be first, followed by Slytherin-Ravenclaw. As they approached the pitch, Ron asked him, "So, how do you feel about this being our last match?"

Harry sighed. "About the same as the other three times you asked me."

Ginny giggled. “It wasn’t three times,” protested Ron, annoyed. “Twice, maybe. I just wondered if you felt differently. I’m just going to try to savor it, enjoy it as much as I can. Don’t be in too big a hurry to catch the Snitch, Harry.”

“What if we fall behind? We are using the same brooms they are, after all.”

Ron grunted. “I don’t know why I let you talk me into not using our Firebolts. You must have been using the Imperius Charm.”

Harry knew Ron was just complaining for fun. “No, as I’ve said, it’s because we’re playing Hufflepuff. You know, fair play, and all that. Besides, it’s almost an empty gesture on our parts, since the only way they can win the Cup is to beat us by nine hundred points. I trust you won’t let that happen.”

“I’ll do my best,” said Ron sarcastically. “I haven’t been taking any Keeper lessons from Corner, so we should do all right.”

“Well, we did have a huge broom advantage—”

“And Hufflepuff pasted them pretty good in the second match, if you recall,” countered Ron. “I’ll be rooting for Slytherin today.”

“Still holding a grudge, I see.”

“Maybe he apologized to you, but he didn’t to me, for that crack about my schoolwork. Just because he’s a Ravenclaw...”

Ron was still muttering as they walked onto the pitch, the crowd in their seats. Harry looked around, savoring the atmosphere, sorry in a way that the match wasn’t important to the Quidditch Cup. Strange, he thought, the last time I could really concentrate on a match that would win the Cup was third year, and I was too nervous then to enjoy it. Last year, I couldn’t concentrate because I’d just found out that Albus was going to die, and this year, it’s already decided. Well, I’ll do my best anyway.

“Captains, shake hands,” said Madam Hooch, and Ron exchanged a friendly handshake with William Perkins, a Hufflepuff fifth year. Harry often remembered, on hearing Perkins’ name, that Professor Binns used to call him ‘Perkins.’ At least he wasn’t impressed that I was Harry Potter, he couldn’t even remember my name,

thought Harry. He mounted his broom and started focusing on the Snitch. He knew that Ron wouldn't mind if the match lasted a while, but he also knew that he had to do his best to catch the Snitch as soon as he could. Being unsportsmanlike against Corner was one thing, but it was different against Hufflepuff.

Madam Hooch blew the whistle, and Harry took off, heading in the direction he thought the Snitch would be. Focusing hard on it, he was astonished when it suddenly flew into his hand. Madam Hooch blew the whistle again, stopping the match, as Colin shouted, "Potter has the Snitch, in... three seconds! Unbelievable!"

Harry couldn't believe it either, as Ron flew over. Nobody had gotten very far, and everyone started heading down, as if there had been some mistake. Ron gave Harry a questioning look; Harry shrugged in response. Suddenly it dawned on Harry what had happened, and he had a sinking feeling. I don't believe this, he thought. Seeing Perkins, he shouted, "William! Come over here!"

A confused Perkins followed Harry and Ron to Madam Hooch, and they all landed. "What's going on?" asked Perkins.

"I made a mistake," said Harry, feeling awful. "I was focusing on the Snitch, thinking about getting it. I didn't mean to, but I..." He paused, deeply embarrassed, then continued. "I accidentally Summoned it." Ron, Perkins, and Madam Hooch wore equally surprised looks. "I'm sorry, Ron."

This deepened Ron's confusion. "Why are you sorry?"

Now Harry was surprised; the answer was obvious. "Because not only do we have to forfeit the match, but we didn't even get to play."

"We don't have to forfeit, Harry," said Ron. "We still win."

"Of course we don't! You can't Summon the Snitch! It would be stupid if you could!"

Ron gave Harry his most tolerant expression. "All the rules say is that you can't use artifacts, and you can't use a wand. The rulebook didn't anticipate wandless magic." He gestured to Madam Hooch, seeking confirmation.

Looking slightly bewildered, she said, “Mr. Weasley is right. I know the rules backwards and forwards, and this is not covered. It’s an obvious violation of the spirit of the rules, but not of the rules themselves, and I have to go by the rules. I must consider this a Gryffindor victory, by the score of—”

“You must be kidding!” burst out Harry, drawing a reproving glance from Madam Hooch. “I don’t want to lose this way, but I sure don’t want to win this way, either. Can’t we just do it over? Call it a... I don’t know, a mistake? Start the match over?”

“There is no provision in the rules for that, Mr. Potter,” said Madam Hooch sternly. “The result stands, that is all.”

Harry turned to face Perkins. “I’m really sorry.”

Before Perkins could respond, Colin asked, “Harry, could you come up here, please?” Oh, great, thought Harry. I guess he’s got no choice but to pick me, but still...

Harry flew up to where Colin was sitting, and took the seat next to him. “Capturing the Snitch in three seconds, the—”

“Colin,” interrupted Harry, “whatever you do, please don’t use the phrase ‘Star of the Match.’ I feel stupid enough as it is.” There was some scattered chuckling in the crowd.

Taken aback, Colin tried to recover. “Umm, okay... for the post-match interview, Gryffindor Seeker Harry Potter. Harry, what happened?”

“I’m obviously not used to the fact that I can do wandless magic now,” explained Harry. “Without meaning to, I Summoned the Snitch. It was the last thing I wanted to do, it just sort of happened. And before you ask any more questions, I want to apologize to the Hufflepuff team, both for the fact that they didn’t get to play, and for how they lost. I feel especially bad that it happened against them. Hufflepuffs are about fair play, and what happened is about as unfair as it can get. Just because it’s not against the rules doesn’t mean it’s all right.”

“You weren’t using your Firebolts today. I understand that was because you were playing against Hufflepuff, is that right?”

“Yes. After beating Ravenclaw like we did, we wanted to use the same brooms as Hufflepuff was using, so that if we won, it would be fair. Kind of ironic to think of that now, but that was the idea. That was why I was at Seeker; we all decided to go back to our usual positions. If I’d known this was going to happen, I’d have traded places with Ginny.”

As Colin was about to ask the next question, Perkins flew up, obviously intending to speak into the microphone. He sat on Colin’s other side; Colin said, “And this is Hufflepuff captain William Perkins. Was there something you wanted to say, William?”

“Yes, thank you, Colin. Firstly, I want to tell Harry he shouldn’t feel bad. He didn’t mean to do it, and he asked Madam Hooch to start the match over, but she refused. He couldn’t do any more than that. I also want to point out that one week ago, he walked through all kinds of certain death to get rid of Voldemort, so I think we can forgive him a mistake like this.” To Harry’s further embarrassment, the crowd roared its approval of Perkins’ comment.

“That’s very good of you, William,” said Harry sincerely. “I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. I also just talked to Ron, and we agreed on something. The result of the match is final, but we didn’t get to play. We agreed that after the Slytherin-Ravenclaw match, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor will play. It won’t count, and Madam Hooch may or may not choose to officiate, but it would be nice to play anyway. What do you think?” Again, the crowd cheered.

“That sounds great, William. I’d love to do that. Thank you.”

Colin wrapped up the interview, and Harry headed down to the sidelines, landing between Ron and Ginny. “Thanks, Ron. That made me feel a little better.”

“It was his idea,” said Ron. “But yeah, I thought it was a good one. I mean, really, the match almost didn’t count anyway, since Slytherin isn’t going to pick up

nine hundred points on goal differential. It will be nice to play. Like you said, you'll just have to switch with Ginny."

"I wonder if people will think I'm using magic now, even at Chaser."

"You worry too much," said Ginny, grabbing his arm and holding onto it. "C'mon, watch the match."

Harry didn't have the animus towards Corner that Ron did, but it still didn't displease him to see Slytherin score frequently off of him, their Nimbus 2001 brooms superior to Ravenclaw's brooms. After twenty minutes, Augustina got the Snitch, and Slytherin won by a healthy margin. "Looks like they're going to be the team to beat next year," commented Ron.

"Yeah, it seems as though someone taught them how to fly pretty well," said Ginny accusingly.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," protested Ron with a grin. "Ready for the match, Harry?"

"You bet," Harry agreed. "But we thought I was going to be a Seeker, I've never practiced at Chaser on a slow broom."

"Think of it as a challenge," suggested Ginny. "You're going to do really well; Albus told me."

Harry laughed. "Oh, okay. You must be right."

"Wow, he really is suggestible," put in Ron.

The unofficial Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match went roughly as Harry had expected the real one to go. He felt he wasn't as good a Chaser as Ginny, but he scored more than his share of goals, and Ron had an excellent match. Gryffindor was leading, one hundred and sixty to fifty, when Ginny caught the Snitch. After the match, Harry sought out Perkins and thanked him for giving them the opportunity to play.

Soon after the match, people in the crowd were starting to leave. "Just a moment, everyone, there's one more thing," announced Colin. "There will now be a surprise exhibition for anyone who wants to stay to watch it. This exhibition is a

match between a professional Quidditch team, Puddlemere United—” Colin paused as he was interrupted by cheers—“and a team composed of current and former Hogwarts Quidditch players, most of whom have the last name ‘Weasley.’

“Entering the pitch now, please welcome Puddlemere United!” The crowd cheered again, more loudly. Harry was amazed; he had forgotten all about the idea of the match. It had clearly been kept quiet. “And joining three current members of the Gryffindor team, four former members,” as the four joined them on the sidelines. Harry shook the hands of the Weasleys and gave Angelina a hug. “The Weasley All-Stars lineup: at Beater, Fred and George Weasley!” The crowd roared, with even more applause than the Puddlemere team had received; Fred and George exchanged looks of pleasure. “At Chaser, Angelina Johnson, Harry Potter, and Ginny Weasley! At Keeper, Ron Weasley! And at Seeker, Charlie Weasley!”

They walked back onto the pitch. Ron shook hands with the Puddlemere captain, clearly very pleased to be doing so. As Madam Hooch blew the whistle to start the match, Harry thought, if this is because I’m Harry Potter, I suppose I can live with it.

* * * * *

Several hours later, Harry knocked on the door to Snape’s quarters. The door opened, and Snape put down the book he was reading. “Professor, please come in,” said Snape pleasantly, gesturing Harry to a chair. “How was your... re-match against Hufflepuff?”

“You didn’t stay to watch?”

Snape casually shook his head. “I have always tended to leave after the Slytherin match ends. Nothing personal, of course, I simply have never been very interested in Quidditch.”

I wonder if that’s because my father was so good at it, thought Harry, that Snape probably decided it was stupid and didn’t matter. “There’s another thing you

have in common with Hermione, besides having been really good students,” Harry joked.

“Considering her highly emotional personality, I suspect the similarities end there,” observed Snape.

“I guess so. Anyway, we won, and I had a pretty good match. Turns out I’m a fairly good Chaser even if I don’t have a Firebolt. And that even if I do have a Firebolt, I’m not really a match for the pros.” To Snape’s quizzical look, Harry went on, “Didn’t you know about the Puddlemere thing?” Snape shook his head. “Sorry, I guess that after all that time of your viewing my memories, I got used to the idea that you knew everything that was going on with me. Oliver Wood’s the Puddlemere Keeper, and he got their team to come here and play an exhibition against the five Weasleys, Angelina, and I.”

“No doubt they wished to test themselves against Mr. Weasley’s legendary goalkeeping skills,” smirked Snape, though Harry felt that even Snape’s smirks were much less nasty than they used to be.

“Ron said the same thing, actually. No, I know it was probably me,” agreed Harry. “Not Oliver, but the rest of the team, I’d imagine. Anyway, I managed to avoid using magic, and... well, I didn’t embarrass myself, anyway. We were getting beat, a hundred ninety to a hundred ten, when Charlie got the Snitch. So we won, but they were obviously the better team. They should be, of course. Ginny was great, she got most of our goals. And I did manage to get off a couple of blind passes. I didn’t think we’d be able to, since it should only work if we know the person will be open for sure, and both teams were using Firebolts, so we couldn’t know that. But a few times, Hermione let me know through our link that Ginny was open, and where she was. It was kind of cheating, but it was fun.” Seeing Snape’s reactions, Harry added, “I know you’re not that interested, you’re just being tolerant, letting me go on about it.”

“No, it is interesting enough. I was just thinking that I have not quite forgiven Miss Weasley for making me sit through that interminable Gryffindor-

Ravenclaw match in February. I devoutly wished that Slytherin had played first that day, so I would not have been subjected to it. It was abundantly clear that she was exacting retribution against Mr. Corner, but I felt as though she were exacting it against me as well.”

Harry laughed, wondering if Snape had intended for him to do so. “I’d have thought you didn’t know enough about Quidditch to be able to tell.”

“I do not have to know about Quidditch; I merely have to know Miss Weasley, which I do through having viewed your memories. Unlike you, she has a... perhaps ‘killer instinct’ is too strong a phrase, but it is along those lines. Your conscience would trouble you if you did such a thing, but hers would not.”

Hesitantly, Harry said, “Speaking of that, I wanted to ask you about something.” He almost added, ‘You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,’ but realized that Snape would do just that whether he said it or not. “I wanted to ask if, since your Cleansing was reversed, your conscience has bothered you, about the things you’ve done.”

Snape glanced at Harry sharply, then looked past his shoulder, thinking. After a minute, he said, “I know you well enough to know that you would not ask without a good reason, and I feel that having surrendered your privacy as you did, you are entitled to an answer. I would still, however, like to know your reason for asking.”

“I just got back from visiting... I was going to say Voldemort, but I feel like I should say Tom Riddle, since whatever made him Voldemort is gone. It’s been a week, but he’s still not really capable of talking. It’s as though this part of him, the only part I left him with, has been buried for so long, and is so underdeveloped, that it can’t operate on its own. I did Legilimens on him, and from what I got, it wouldn’t surprise me if he was never able to function again. For him, it’s as though he’s waking up from a long, horrible nightmare, and the fact that I took away his capacity for normal negative feelings only makes it harder for him.”

Snape gave Harry a look, the one so familiar to Harry, that made Harry think Snape was looking through him. “You did what you had to do, and you were far more merciful than he deserved. He chose to allow the Voldemort entity to consume him, and is responsible for its consequences; I have no more sympathy for him than I do for myself. It is because of him that you asked?”

“Partly,” said Harry. “I was also thinking about Pettigrew, wondering what to do. The last time I talked to Bright, he said they hadn’t decided what to do with him yet; he’s been kept as a rat since he came back. I think now that Voldemort’s gone, that spell wouldn’t work anymore. I wondered how much his conscience would bother him if I reversed his Cleansing.”

“My answering your question would tell you nothing about that,” said Snape. “Everyone is different. We all have mental constructions to help us justify things we have done that we are not proud of. He might be guilt-ridden, or he might never give it another thought. You could find out, of course.”

“I suppose I could,” agreed Harry. “I’m seriously considering just leaving him as a rat for the rest of his life. Somehow it feels right. I can’t accept approving his being killed; if I could do that, I would’ve let Sirius and Remus do it four years ago. But considering what he did, reversing his Cleansing and letting him go free, or even be under a kind of house arrest, seems way too good for him. And not reversing his Cleansing just to punish him seems... I don’t know, deliberately cruel.”

Snape looked as though he were trying to be tolerant; Harry knew Snape would be far less merciful than he was being. “I cannot really advise you, of course. As for... Riddle, let us say, his feelings will be much different from mine. In part because he has done so much more, and because you have removed his capacity for any negative feelings at all. I will still answer your question if you wish, however.”

Appreciative of Snape’s offer, Harry shook his head. “You’re right, it won’t do me any good. I don’t need to know.”

Again, Snape gave him that penetrating look. “You are curious, but you do not consider that to be sufficient reason to ask.” Snape was silent for a moment,

thinking. Finally, he said, “As for Pettigrew, I clearly cannot give you any guidance with that, either. It sounds as though what you need is to know what it is like to live as an animal for a long period of time.”

Harry nodded. “I understand. I’ll talk to Professor McGonagall.”

“I would like to go with you,” said Snape, standing. “There is something that needs to be discussed.”

They left Snape’s quarters. Snape turned left, heading for McGonagall’s. “No, she’s in her office,” Harry corrected Snape.

“How do you know?” asked a curious Snape as they walked.

Harry summoned an image of the three-dimensional map of Hogwarts that he had coaxed from the Room of Requirement in December; it went with them as they walked. “I don’t have to make it visible, I can just see it in my head,” explained Harry.

“You will no doubt find all sorts of conveniences as you explore your new abilities,” commented Snape. “By the way, I assume you are aware that the public is wondering why Riddle is not being put on trial, and want to know when he will be.”

“Yes, Archibald told me yesterday,” said Harry. “I don’t see what the problem is. He’s in custody, he’s not going anywhere.”

“I know you find it distasteful—and I am sure that Professor Dentus has already mentioned it—but the public will be comforted by justice, if not vengeance.”

“I know, but killing him would be really wrong,” Harry said as they neared McGonagall’s office. “He’s harmless, there’s no reason to.”

“There is the deterrent value,” suggested Snape, knocking on the door, which opened.

McGonagall, remaining seated, gestured them to chairs. “Hello, what can I do for you two?”

“Professor Snape would like Slytherin to play first in all future Quidditch matches,” joked Harry. He glanced at Snape, expecting a reaction, but Snape was placid.

“He is joking, of course, but that is not a bad idea,” said Snape.

To Harry, McGonagall smiled a little and replied, “Yes, he has also complained to me about your Ravenclaw match. Of course, I have not even decided whether we will continue playing two matches a day next year, as it was instituted only to facilitate security, which is no longer an issue.” She appeared to think for a few seconds, then looked up. “Well, then, was that all?”

Harry chuckled. “No, it isn’t. I’m thinking of asking the Ministry to deal with Pettigrew by forcing him to live the rest of his life as a rat, and I wanted to ask someone who’s an Animagus how they felt about that.”

“I feel that you are letting him off easy, but I suspect that is not exactly what you are asking. I do not think that it would be cruel. After all, he spent years as a rat, living with the Weasleys.”

“Wouldn’t it be really boring, though? With nothing to do, just whatever it is rats do, all day?”

“It is different, when you are an animal,” explained McGonagall. “As I said recently, it is relaxing, though I admit I have never spent thirteen years as a cat. One does not need as much distraction. One can think, but it is not quite the same.”

“Maybe I should do Legilimens on him, see how it is for him.”

“If it will help...” said McGonagall, who suddenly shrank rapidly and seemed to disappear into her chair. A gray tabby cat with black stripes jumped from the chair to the top of McGonagall’s desk, walked across the desk, then jumped again, into the lap of a startled Snape.

Harry laughed, both at Snape’s discomfited reaction and McGonagall’s humorous gesture. Snape kept his arms at his sides as the cat moved around on his lap, at one point standing on her hind legs, her front paws on his chest. Harry laughed again as Snape’s annoyance grew. “Very well, Headmistress, you have given Professor Potter his laugh, you may go now.”

The cat gave him a disdainful look, turned, and jumped onto Harry’s lap. She put her paws on his chest now; he smiled and rubbed her head, then petted the

length of her body. She purred, to Harry's delight. Then she moved her paws off his chest, and started exercising her front claws on his lap, piercing his robe and clawing his thighs. "Ow!" he exclaimed, and it was Snape's turn to laugh. "You would do that, wouldn't you," he said to the cat, which gave him a look which he could have sworn meant, 'Well, what do you expect, I *am* a cat.' He tolerated the clawing for a minute, then the cat settled comfortably on his lap. He started petting her again, losing himself in the pleasant sensation of it.

Finally, Snape asked, "Well, have you determined anything?"

"Oh, that. I was enjoying petting her, I forgot all about the reason she did it." Continuing to pet her, he cast Legilimens. Viewing her memories of the past few minutes, he said to Snape, "I kind of see what she means. It's as though simple pleasures are nicer, more meaningful. For example, she likes being petted, but there aren't many people she'd let do it. She was paying you a compliment, you know."

"I have never been very good with animals," said Snape stiffly. Harry smiled as he continued to pet the cat. Probably because you have to show affection when you deal with animals, he thought, and Snape wouldn't be comfortable with that. He was surprised to also find a few memories: he saw her, as a cat, enter Dumbledore's quarters. He understood that occasionally she had visited him, sat on his lap, and been petted. He sensed how much she had enjoyed it, and that she missed that aspect of her relationship with him. Seeing that helped him understand the compliment she was paying him by allowing him to pet her.

Harry and Snape chatted for a while as Harry petted the cat, who finally stood, rubbed her head against Harry's chest, then jumped back onto the desk, then the chair. A second later, McGonagall was again sitting in the chair.

"Well, did that help?" she asked with amusement.

"It made me want to get a cat," he half-joked. "But yes, it did, thank you. I sort of understand what it feels like."

"How long was it?" she asked.

Harry looked at Snape. "About ten minutes?" Snape nodded.

She looked surprised. “It felt like a much shorter time to me,” she explained, “but then, it always does.”

Taking on a more serious expression, she said, “Harry, there is something that Professor Snape and I need to discuss with you. It concerns your future plans. Professor Snape has told me that you do not like to contemplate the subject, but the time by which we need to know is rapidly approaching. I do not wish to have to find a new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor at the last minute.”

“And I,” said Snape sternly, “do not wish to be stuck with the scheduling, only to have you at the last minute decide to stay, having avoided the duty of the deputy headmaster.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to be deputy headmaster, even if I stay?” asked Harry. “Now, I don’t see any reason you couldn’t.”

“You do not want to be seen as pushing me out of the position, but you need not worry; I will explain publicly the arrangement under which I accepted the position. And even though my Cleansing has been reversed, I still do not possess the proper ‘people skills’ that a headmaster or a deputy headmaster should have. The arrangement was temporary, and I am quite content for it to remain that way. So, you must emerge from your cocoon of denial, and embrace your future.” To Harry’s surprised glance, Snape explained, “You know perfectly well what choice you will make, Professor, you simply do not want to admit it to yourself. You do not want to give up your romantic notions of becoming an Auror, but you know that your place is here.”

Harry knew that Snape was referring to all the time he’d spent viewing Harry’s memories, and he knew that Snape was right. “Can’t I stay in my cocoon a little longer?” he joked. “I suppose you’re right, I just wish I could somehow do both. But I can’t face the idea of not staying here.”

“Not to mention that there would be a student uprising if you left,” said McGonagall, amused in advance at Harry’s predictable embarrassed reaction. “Very well. Please do not tell anyone outside of the other five; I will handle the

announcement. And do not worry, I will show you how to assemble the schedule. Then again, perhaps you will be able to do so magically.”

“No, I am sure that such a thing will not be possible to do with magic,” said Snape, deadpan. “You will have to do it the hard way, as I did.”

McGonagall smiled, and Harry laughed. “You’re hoping I’ll be suggestible about this, I see. Well, I guess we’ll find out.”

“One other thing, Harry,” added McGonagall. “Sybil will not be with us next year.”

“She’s hardly ever with us now,” remarked Harry, almost to himself. “What happened?”

“I suppose Albus never told you about the little ritual involving her,” said McGonagall. “For the past fifteen years, every year at this time, she would come to Albus and submit her resignation, saying the fates had informed her that she should move on, or some such nonsense. He would nod understandingly, and request, as a personal favor, that she stay. With varying degrees of persuasion necessary, differing from year to year, she would allow herself to be talked into staying for another year. Albus understood that she did not truly intend to resign, but that she wanted to be reassured that she was valued.

“Two weeks after his death last year, even though she had been through it with him before he died, she came to me to do the ritual as well. To say that I was not in the mood for it would be putting it mildly; I couched my answer in the context of saying that it was important that the staff remain cohesive after his death, and so forth. I so much wanted to allow her to leave, but of course, I could not. Now, I can, and did yesterday. Professor Snape, who was with me at the time, tells me that her intention to leave was actually genuine this time, but she was still clearly offended by my disinclination to plead with her to stay.” McGonagall related the story with a long-suffering air, Harry couldn’t help but smile, knowing how McGonagall felt about Trelawney, a feeling he shared somewhat.

“Well, I can’t say I’m bothered,” said Harry. “But why couldn’t you have let her leave before?” Glancing at Snape, Harry sighed. “I see your ‘don’t be stupid’ look, so I guess it’s something obvious. But I still don’t know, sorry.”

McGonagall explained. “She had to be kept because of the prophecy. She did not remember giving the prophecy, so she never knew the reason, but that was it. If Death Eaters found out, or knew, that it was she who gave the prophecy, she could have been abducted and the information taken from her. It was also necessary to keep her in case she provided more prophecies, which she did, twice. Now that the struggle against Voldemort is over, we need keep her here no longer. I am seriously considering replacing Divination with a class on Mysticism. I would simply need to find a teacher who knows what they are talking about. If we find someone, Harry, you will sit in on the interview. For this in particular, you are extremely qualified.”

I guess a deputy headmaster would naturally have to interview teachers, he thought. I thought it was a funny idea, at dinner with Archibald last July. Strange to think that now, I might be doing it for real.

* * * * *

One thing that Harry’s magical abilities didn’t allow him to do was to be instantly prepared for the N.E.W.T.s that he would be taking at the end of the year, and in early June, he started using what little free time he had to study for them. He knew he would get perfect scores on the practical applications portions of the tests for Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, and Transfigurations, but his abilities would not help him in Potions or Care of Magical Creatures. At Dentus’s urging, he had decided to try the History of Magic N.E.W.T., despite not having studied the class much throughout the year. “Who knows, if you get the right kind of question, you may be able to write about yourself,” Dentus had joked.

As the last week of June arrived, Harry and Ginny were the most relaxed ones of the group, since Ginny didn't have N.E.W.T.s until next year, and Harry's job didn't hinge on his results. Neither did Hermione's, but she had self-imposed pressure, and Ron, Neville, and Pansy had to worry that their job prospects could at least be complicated by poor results, so they studied hard. Harry tried not to ostentatiously relax while they were studying; if he didn't feel the need to study, he went somewhere else.

In the next-to-last week of the school year, Harry did the year's final check on the energy of love. Twelve students joined the group who could do it, bringing the total to thirty-one. As just a number, it felt very good to Harry, but as a percentage—it was slightly more than ten percent of all students—it didn't seem quite so good. McGonagall and his friends tried to reassure him that it was an excellent result, and he had to admit that it was better than he had thought was possible at the beginning of the year. He also felt encouraged that the results would be better the next year, when students would have been practicing it for a longer time.

Harry conducted his final exams for the first, second, third, fourth, and sixth years in the same way he had the previous year, by spending ten minutes with each student, but he decided that during the summer he would work on a new way to give students their exams: he would try to create a Ring of Reduction that would contain obstacles that could be gotten past using what they had learned that year.

His N.E.W.T.s were finished by Thursday of the last week of June, and so were the classes he taught: his Friday classes were only fifth and seventh years, and there were no classes, since all of these students were taking O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s. So, Friday was a day off for him, giving him extra time to feel nostalgic. He spent some time with the others, who each had at least one test, but were finished by mid-afternoon. He also did something he had been intending to do for a while, but had been putting off.

He materialized in the area the Aurors had used as a prison facility; he knew exactly where to go, since he had visited once before. He knew there were magical

monitors to identify any entrance into the area, but he also knew that the Aurors wouldn't object to his entry. He walked to Riddle's bed.

Voldemort had always appeared pale and thin, but Riddle seemed even more so. Despite the fact that he knew it was the same person, Harry couldn't help but think, this doesn't look like Voldemort. There was something different that Harry couldn't put his finger on; he wondered if personality could actually affect a person's appearance. The thing that looked the most different about him was his expression. As Voldemort, it had always been smug, arrogant, evil; now, it was weak, frightened.

"Riddle?" said Harry, trying to get Riddle's attention. Riddle flinched, as if he'd heard something but didn't know what it was. He stared straight ahead, apparently not seeing Harry. Harry cast Legilimens, looking for memories of the past month. He discovered that Riddle's current existence was one of complete misery. Riddle could not feel anger, but he could feel sadness and guilt, and both of those feelings overwhelmed him. The knowledge of what he had done as Voldemort was literally debilitating. Riddle could barely talk, could not hold a conversation, could not even answer questions which required a yes or a no. He was just existing, Harry understood, not living.

Harry cast the Imperius Charm, knowing it was the only way to talk to Riddle. He also knew he had to be careful; he had learned from his experience in the Ring with Hermione that he should avoid making any requests or expressing any wishes, which Riddle would then be obliged to follow.

Riddle opened his eyes, suddenly alert, taking in everything around him. He smiled, which looked odd to Harry, since he had only seen Voldemort smile in an evil way. "Thank you," said Riddle. "I never thought I would feel as I do right now. I know it is only temporary, unfortunately. I know I deserve no better, and deserve all the misery I will feel when this spell is no longer on me. Still, I am happy, at least for this moment."

Harry couldn't help but wonder how much of the person who killed his parents was the person in front of him. "Do you think there's any chance that you'll get better?"

Riddle calmly shook his head. "Not unless you give me Memory Charms to cover up everything I have done since the age of fifteen, and probably not even then. I am still alive, but my life is spent. The part of me that you drove off virtually destroyed the part of me to which you speak now; it was so deeply submerged that I would not have thought it possible to have a conversation such as this. Only the power of your spell makes it possible. As soon as you leave, I will not be able to face myself, what I have done. I will once again be the pathetic creature you saw on the bed. I am not only weak from all the years of virtual nonexistence, but totally unequipped to deal with what I have done."

Being careful not to make any definitive statements, Harry asked, "But isn't it possible to say that the person I'm talking to now isn't the one who did all that?"

"It is possible," Riddle agreed. "But it is definitely true that the person you are talking to now allowed it to happen, made the choices that made it possible. I cannot avoid responsibility for what I have done.

"I have a request," continued Riddle earnestly. "I do not deserve to be able to do so, but for as long as I can... I very much want to end my misery. I know that you will not allow the Ministry to kill me, because it is not necessary. I hope that you will be merciful enough to allow me to end my own life. I request that you take me to the Veil of Mystery, and allow me to walk through. I know from viewing your memories what awaits me. I do not look forward to it, but I am now in a living hell, one of my own making. I wish to escape it, and I can only do so with your help. Again, I know I am utterly undeserving; if anyone deserves a living hell, it is I. I ask it of you anyway."

Harry didn't want to answer right away. "Why do you say, 'for as long as I can?'"

“I can barely speak when not assisted by your spell,” answered Riddle. “I could never summon the willpower to make such a request, much as I might want to. This is my only opportunity to make this request.”

“It’s hard for me to agree to this,” said Harry. “You’re asking me to... not kill you, but I would be instrumental in your death. I know you want it, but it’s not easy for me anyway.”

“Yes, I know this about you,” agreed Riddle. “But it is what I wish. You know this to be true, and you know it is true in my normal state as well.”

Harry had indeed gotten the impression from using Legilimency that Riddle wanted nothing more than for his pain to end. He knew that plenty of people would regard the current state of affairs as nothing less than poetic justice, and be quite content to let it continue. But he couldn’t see the point of allowing someone to exist in pain, with no end in sight, for no other reason than that the person deserved it.

He also knew that he would be violating wizarding law by doing as Riddle asked, but he found that bothered him less than the moral question. Harry’s experience was that wizarding law seemed to be no more than guidelines, to be discarded when events dictated it. Fudge had abused or violated it several times that Harry knew of, and even Bright temporarily changed it because of political pressure to allow the executions. If I do this, he thought, I’ll go to them afterwards and tell them what I did, and accept the consequences. But I’m not going to go to Bright and ask him if it’s all right to allow Riddle to walk through the Veil of Mystery. He could allow it, but he’d calculate the political costs and benefits, take forever like he did with my going into the Ring. No, I got him, I can make this decision. Well, Hermione helped, maybe I should ask her. She’ll tell me to do what I think is right, but I should still ask.

He got a response immediately. You’ve been sending like crazy, she sent him. I know the whole situation. You’re right, I would tell you to do what you think

is right. But I think you should do what he asks. I think people should have the right to decide whether to continue to live or not, no matter what they've done.

Thanks, he sent, I'm glad to know what you think. I'm sorry I was sending so much, I didn't mean to distract you from your N.E.W.T.s. Are you finished?

I was just finishing when this started, so it's all right. If you do it, be sure to take me with you. I don't want you walking through that thing, and I can hold you back, it can't call to me. Don't go there without me.

I understand, he sent. Returning his attention to Riddle, he thought again, and realized that he had made up his mind. "Okay," he said somberly. "I'll do it."

"Thank you," said Riddle gratefully as he stood. "I am ready any time."

Harry sent to Hermione, and she asked him to wait for a minute while she went someplace private before she disappeared. A minute later, she let him know he could take her any time.

The three suddenly appeared in the room with the Veil of Mystery. Riddle looked at it, mesmerized. "So many voices... as Voldemort, I was immune to this effect. But now, I can hear the voices, hundreds of them. I had not realized..."

Harry and Hermione remained silent, solemn. Riddle continued to gaze at the Veil, then walked toward it. He went through it, and was gone.

I wonder what he meant, sent Hermione. Realized what?

I did Legilimens on him quickly just after he said that, Harry responded. Apparently you hear the voices not only if someone close to you died, but also if you killed them.

We should leave, she sent.

Okay, but I'm all right. I can hear the voices, but I'm not about to walk through. You know, you can feel it.

I know. But we should still leave.

Okay, he sent, I'll send you back to Hogwarts. There's one other place I want to go. If I'm going to be breaking laws, I want to do it all at once.

They disappeared from the room, each to a different place. Harry found himself on a very typical-looking suburban street, with trees, cars parked in front of homes, and even a few white picket fences. Casting a spell on himself that caused it to appear to others that he was wearing normal Muggle clothes, not robes, he walked up the walkway to the nearest house. First checking magically to make sure that the person he wanted was at home, he rang the doorbell.

After a short wait, a tall, fit, brown-haired man answered. “Can I help you?”

With a brief wave of his hand—even though he didn’t need a wand, he still retained the habit of moving a hand when he did spells—he removed the Memory Charm that had been placed on the man. The man’s eyes widened. “Professor Potter?”

“Hello, Captain Ingersoll. Yes, it’s me, but you can call me Harry.”

“I... I don’t believe it. I thought I would never... you took that spell off me, the one that made me forget. Why? Has something else happened?”

“No, it hasn’t. I just felt like... what happened in September almost got you killed, and I thought you deserved to remember it. If you’d rather not, I’ll put it back on.”

“No, no, I do want to remember,” Ingersoll assured him. “Thank you.”

“I’m putting a Forgetfulness spell on you, it’ll make you forget temporarily if you try to tell anyone else who doesn’t already know about the wizarding world,” explained Harry. “Just as a precaution. A lot has happened since September, the Voldemort thing is over. You can find out about it on the Internet; if you search for my name and Voldemort, you’ll probably find it.”

“So,” said Ingersoll with mild incredulity, “this whole wizarding world is a big secret, but you can find out about it on the Internet.”

“Kind of a loophole in the laws. I’m sure they’ll get around to closing it, at some point.”

“I guess in some ways, your bureaucracy isn’t much different from ours,” chuckled Ingersoll. “I’ll look for that. But I’d love to hear about it from you, if you’d like to come in.”

Harry shook his head. “Sorry, I can’t, they’ll know I’m gone if I’m away too long. This isn’t exactly authorized, it just felt like the right thing to do. Maybe sometime when I have more time.”

“I’d like that,” said Ingersoll, extending a hand. “Thanks for coming by.”

Harry shook it. “You’re welcome.” He let go of Ingersoll’s hand, and disappeared.

* * * * *

That evening, Harry once again felt nostalgic, as he took part in his last-ever end-of-term feast as a student. He sat with the teachers only for the beginning announcements, when he learned that Hufflepuff had won the House Cup for the year. He hadn’t known, and with amusement reflected on the fact that who won the Cup had seemed extremely important in his first year, and now struck him as totally irrelevant. He understood that its purpose was to give the point system meaning, and so to encourage good work and good behavior among the students, but he wondered if it was very effective; he couldn’t remember ever having done anything deliberately to try to get points, or not doing something to avoid points being taken away. Then he smiled, wondering how many points Hermione had earned for Gryffindor over the years by knowing almost every answer there was to know. He supposed that even if students didn’t make specific efforts to get points, it was a way of letting students know what was and was not approved of. He had given points for students saying Voldemort’s name, so it had worked for him as a teacher, if not as a student.

Before announcing the winner of the House Cup, McGonagall had given a short speech to honor the memory of those who had died at Hogwarts during the

year, eighteen in all. She recited the names, then asked for a moment of silence. Then she pointed out that it was a good year in that Voldemort had been defeated, and offered her thanks to all who had helped make it happen.

She then announced that Professor Snape was stepping down from his ‘temporary’ appointment as deputy headmaster, and that “...taking over the position of deputy headmaster will be Professor Harry Potter.” The applause was as loud as Harry could remember having heard in the Hall; he focused on Ginny talking to him in her hand, and Hermione’s feeling of pride. He waved, hoping it would cause the applause to end sooner. He was happy for the support, even though he could have expected it. He thought about how, as deputy headmaster, he would be taking the first years from Hagrid in September and escorting them to the Great Hall to be Sorted. Something about the thought made him hopeful for the future.

The next morning, Harry and his friends boarded the Hogwarts Express for the last time. They didn’t have their trunks; taking advantage of Harry’s new abilities, they’d had him send their trunks and pets to the Burrow before they got on the train. It didn’t seem quite the same, thought Harry, not having to struggle with trunks and cages. Somehow that seemed part of what the Hogwarts Express was all about, though Fawkes and Flora were with them.

They got the same compartment at the back of the train that they’d had on the way in, due to Harry having put a spell on it to make people think it was full. “Maybe that’s not quite fair of me to do,” he conceded when Hermione asked about it, “but it doesn’t seem like such a big deal.”

The others agreed, but Hermione wasn’t sure. “It just doesn’t seem right, to use your abilities to get some benefit at other people’s expense, even if it doesn’t hurt them.”

“Come on, Hermione, it’s just seats on a train,” pointed out Ron, his tone making it clear he thought she was being overly fussy.

“Yeah, it’s not as though I broke the law or something,” said Harry humorously.

She sent mild irritation through their link. “That’s different, I can defend that. What you did there was moral, not something for your own convenience.” Harry had told Ginny on his hand the night before about what he had done, but hadn’t had a chance to tell the others, so he did. They were surprised, but not stunned, as he had thought they might be.

“It sounds like you did the right thing,” said Neville.

“What I wonder is, why didn’t I read about it in the paper this morning,” said Hermione. “I looked carefully, there was nothing.”

“I went to Snape’s office to say goodbye an hour ago,” said Harry. “I told him and McGonagall yesterday, neither of them were bothered, except naturally Snape thinks I was too good to him. I hadn’t noticed about the paper, but he had. He thinks the Ministry didn’t announce it because they, or Bright, aren’t sure how to present it. I’d be content for them to just tell the truth, of course. Snape thinks they might not want to admit I did something illegal if they’re not prepared to punish me for it, which they won’t.”

“Did you tell Bright what you did?” asked Ron.

Harry nodded. “He was far more bothered that I did it without authorization than that I did it, period. There was never any question of him trying to charge me with anything; he admitted that if he tried to charge me, ‘I would be removed as Minister, then beaten to death with clubs.’ I tried not to laugh, but it was funny.”

“Also true, I’m sure,” added Hermione.

“Which, I also didn’t say, is one of the reasons I don’t have the greatest respect for the law,” continued Harry. “It seems like the law should be applied to everyone, no matter who they are. Anyway, he gave me this little lecture on not using my power to do stuff like that, not to impose my will on society just because I can. I told him I didn’t do it because I could, but because it seemed like the right

thing to do. He understood that, but he still gave me this look, like he was disappointed in me. You know the one, Ron, that Albus gave us when we flew the car. Except that with Albus, I felt guilty about it. With Bright, I didn't care."

"He doesn't exactly have the moral standing to make you feel guilty," agreed Neville. "Now, Hermione, on the other hand..."

Everyone laughed. "Yes, that's true," agreed Harry. "I told him not to worry, that I didn't plan on running around breaking the law all the time."

"Just occasionally," joked Ron.

"Well, I didn't say that, but I do wonder if he thought it. Not that I care about that, either."

"That's an unusual comment, for you," said a surprised Neville.

He shrugged. "I still think he's a good Minister, and I'd generally support him, but whatever personal feelings I had for him, I don't feel right now. I was really unhappy with him for making us wait so long to go into the Ring. That was over a month of unnecessary waiting, and he didn't have a clue what it was like for us. It just reminded me that he's going to do what's best for him politically. Not that he ever pretended otherwise, I'll give him that, but I haven't quite forgiven him for that yet. Maybe, someday."

"Keep in mind, Harry," said Hermione, "that if we'd failed—and it looked like we would, after the fifth room—a lot of people might have died. What we did was the right thing, but it wasn't an easy decision for him, or wouldn't have been if he'd gotten to make it." He couldn't deny that what she said was true, but he still knew that Bright hadn't needed a month.

Changing the subject, Hermione asked, "Did Professor Snape say anything about the article this morning when you talked to him?"

"What article?" asked Pansy.

"Oh, that's right, you ate at the Slytherin table," recalled Hermione. "So I guess you didn't read the Prophet."

“The second years aren’t all that interested in the Prophet,” pointed out Pansy.

“They would’ve been, today,” said Hermione. “There was a big article about Snape. Yes, I was surprised too, when I found out he agreed to it. It was a pretty long article; it was almost his life story, in a way. It was all about his role in the Order, what he did, how he spied on Voldemort, that kind of thing. It also talks about the Cleansing for the first time publicly, and how Harry reversed it. What I want to know, Harry, is why he agreed to it.”

“Hugo spent an hour around him the day we went into the Ring,” explained Harry. “It was the first time he’d ever been around Snape for so long, and he got a pretty good read on him. At some point he got the sense that Snape felt he wouldn’t mind what he did being known, even if some of it made him look bad. He persuaded Snape to let him do it, partly for the historical record, and partly because he deserved it. Hugo interviewed me for the article, of course. I said some nice things about him, but I was also honest, about what happened before sixth year.

“Snape’s one condition for the article was that it couldn’t appear any earlier than today. The last thing he wants is students coming up to him after class asking him about it. He figures they’ll have mostly forgotten about it by September, and for most, he’s probably right. I just think he feels it’s right that he’s recognized for what he’s done. Anyway, to answer your question, Hermione, I teased him about it a little, saying I heard some students wanted his autograph. He just gave me that annoyed look he often does, and said that he didn’t think they’d be making a Chocolate Frog card of him anytime soon. But it’s obviously not the kind of thing he’s going to want to talk about, just to bring up and chat about.”

“I’m just glad Hugo didn’t interview me for the article,” said Neville.

“I don’t know, he was fine in our Potions classes,” said Ron, who Harry assumed was unaware of the depth of Neville’s problems with Snape. “For him, he was a pussycat.”

“I don’t think I can get myself to think of him like that,” responded Neville. “But I’ll admit, he was a lot better than he had been. Which isn’t saying much, of course. Now, Sprout, that’s how a professor should be.” After a second, Neville glanced at Harry and Hermione, hastily adding, “And you two, of course.”

The others laughed. “Nice save, Neville, but a little late,” chuckled Pansy. “So, Harry, what are you going to do now, I mean, where will you stay? Now that security’s not an issue anymore...”

Harry looked at Ginny. “I’m not in a huge hurry to leave the Burrow, and for now, we can sleep in my quarters at Hogwarts. I don’t think we’ll really change that much until Ginny graduates. Then we’ll really have to decide what we want to do; we’d probably get a house then.”

“For which Harry will create new charms to keep invisible and inaccessible,” joked Ginny. “Ron, Pansy, how about you?”

“Probably we’ll just stay at the Burrow, at least that’s the plan for now,” said Ron. “We’ll both be really busy, me with the Auror training, and her with the Healer course. I’ll be getting a half-salary for being in the Auror training, so we could technically afford an apartment, but it would be tight, and it’s too convenient living at home, with Mum doing all the cooking and cleaning. If the price I have to pay is Mum constantly asking when we’re going to get married, I guess I can live with it.”

The others exchanged grins, knowing how Molly was. Harry didn’t think Ginny would be able to resist, and he was right. “So, Ron, when are you—”

“Very funny,” Ron cut her off.

Pansy answered the question. “We seem to be getting along all right,” she said, with a teasing smile at Ron, “but we don’t need to be in a hurry to decide that. We’ve decided that we’re not going to decide anything like that until we’re both done with our training, so at least three years. We’ll be together at the Burrow, so nothing will be different. But yes, I’m sure Molly will ask regularly anyway. I don’t mind, it gives me something to bother Ron about.”

“That’s probably part of the reason Mum does it,” grumbled Ron. “How about you two?” he asked Neville.

“For now, the same as Harry and Ginny,” said Neville. “The Burrow during the day, her Hogwarts quarters at night. The question is what happens after I start the training course, which officially starts in early August, and then when school starts in September. The Hogwarts quarters aren’t really intended for couples, but Professor McGonagall has told Hermione that it’s all right if we use that as our home for a while. How long we do that depends on how we like it, or how convenient or inconvenient it is. The good part is that house-elves do everything for you; the bad part is you can’t Apparate there. Well, I can’t, anyway,” he joked, with a glance at Harry. “So I can Apparate to the Hogwarts gate and walk through, get a lift from Flora, or have Harry do his new thing, and send me back and forth all the time. I know you already said you don’t mind,” he added, anticipating Harry’s objection. “It’s just not a long-term solution.”

“We’ll probably start looking at apartments very soon, just to see what’s available,” added Hermione. “Fortunately, with my salary and Neville’s half-salary, we’ll be all right, money-wise. And I’ve saved almost all my salary from this year, so we could make a good down payment on a house. And if we stayed in my Hogwarts quarters for a year and saved our money, we could almost afford a house outright.”

“I guess you’ll be visiting your parents more, now that it’s safer,” suggested Ginny.

Hermione nodded, looking as though she’d been reminded of something she’d rather not have been. “I also need to have a talk with my parents. You know I’ve been keeping all this from them, so they wouldn’t worry. Well, now that it’s over, and I’m semi-famous in the wizarding world for going into the Ring with Harry, I’m going to sit down with them and tell them everything. I’ve felt bad about more or less shutting them out of my life. But I’m not looking forward to it. I don’t know how they’ll react.”

Harry didn't know either, and didn't know what to say. He decided that feelings were better; he sent, it may be difficult, but you're their daughter and they love you, this won't change that.

I know, she sent back, it's just going to be hard. But thanks for the support. Aloud, she said, "At least, now it's the post-Voldemort era, we could call it. If that's the worst of my problems—and it is—that's a pretty good situation."

They talked about Harry's experience with Riddle the day before, Harry giving the others detailed impressions. An hour into the trip, the trolley came, and Ron bought ten Chocolate Frogs. "It might have the new version of your card," said Ron, with poorly disguised false innocence. Harry had found out a few days before that a new version of his Chocolate Frog card would soon be issued, updated with a picture of him in the rainbow-style robe and with recent information about his having defeated Voldemort and developed new magical abilities.

"You know it doesn't come out until tomorrow," Harry chided him. "And you're a really bad actor."

"I have to act this badly," protested Ron. "I could lie better, but then you wouldn't know I was lying, and you'd miss the point."

Harry rolled his eyes and decided not to get into it further. He stood, and the others looked at him in surprise. "Going to the bathroom already?" asked Pansy. "It's only been an hour."

"No, I've decided to amaze you all with an incredible act of bravery," said Harry with mock pomposity. "I'm going to walk the length of the train, stop by all the compartments, and talk to people for a few minutes." Smiling at their reactions, he added, "See, I really have amazed you."

"What brought this on?" wondered Ginny.

"I was just thinking about how I was going to miss doing this. I still could, of course, but it seems different as just a teacher, not a teacher and a student. Besides, everyone knows me, so I'm not going to get the same reactions I would in

Diagon Alley. It seemed like an opportunity I'm not going to get again, in the same way."

"That's great, good for you," Hermione encouraged him. "Just don't spend more than a couple minutes with each group, or you won't be able to talk to everyone."

"Don't worry about us," added Pansy. "We'll just talk about you after you're gone."

"I appreciate that," he joked back as he left the compartment.

He returned to their compartment with less than an hour to go in their trip. They chatted the time away quickly, and soon the train was pulling into King's Cross. Feeling it strange not to have to drag his trunk out of the storage areas, Harry and his friends waited behind those who did, and filed out of the train. It didn't take them long to find Molly, waiting for them on the platform. "Mum, you didn't have to come," pointed out Ginny. "We were just going to Apparate home."

"I know, but it just seems right for me to be here," said Molly. "It'll feel strange two years from now, when there won't be anyone for me to meet here." She looked unusually pleased about something, and Harry soon found out what. "Oh, Harry, Dudley was over earlier. He told me that his parents have invited you over for dinner, whenever it's convenient."

"You must be joking," was all Harry could think of to say, astonished as he was. Many emotions went through him in a short time; he sent to Hermione, I must be sending everything I'm feeling.

Yes, you are, it's understandable, she sent back. I think this is one of those things that Albus said magic wouldn't help you with. Just do whatever you think is best.

"Speaking of incredible acts of bravery," he muttered. "First, I'm going to talk to him, ask him some questions about how they seemed when they told him this. But if it seemed like it was genuine, then I guess I'll do it." Turning to

Hermione, he said, “Tell you what, Hermione. I’ll sit down with your parents and tell them about everything you did, and you have dinner with my aunt and uncle. How about it?”

The others smiled in sympathy for Harry. “I think I’d actually take you up on that,” said Hermione. He nodded, understanding that what she would do was still harder than what he might do, and at least he had a choice.

“Ready to go?” asked Molly, as Harry occasionally waved goodbye to people passing by.

“There’s one thing I wanted to do first, before we went home,” said Harry. “The statue gets unveiled tomorrow, there’ll be a big ceremony. But I want to take a look at it now, just be able to see what it looks like. I won’t be able to do that tomorrow, there’ll be too many people.”

“Aren’t there charms and magic detectors keeping people away from it?” asked Molly.

“Yes, but I can get us past them, obviously,” said Harry. “It’s covered, no one will know we were there.”

“And you promised Bright you wouldn’t run around breaking the law all the time,” joked Ron. “Just kidding, I’d like to see it too, without a whole bunch of people around. You’ll teleport us there?”

“I haven’t decided what I’m going to call it yet, but ‘teleport’ seems like a reasonable word,” said Harry. “But yes, the devices around the statue would detect Apparations.” Making eye contact with everyone to make sure they were ready, Harry waved his hand. It was in the park in Hogsmeade; Harry had checked the location before boarding the train so he would know where to take everyone.

They were suddenly under a white covering, which looked to Harry like a large blanket; it covered the area within ten feet of the statue in every direction, and was three feet above the top of the statue. Harry heard mild gasps as they saw it for the first time. It was made of silver, on a foot-tall oak platform. The base of the statue was rectangular, two feet wide and long, and five feet tall; words were

chiseled into all four sides. On top of that was a sculpture of a phoenix, again in silver, about four times larger than a phoenix's true size.

They stepped back a little so they could see the phoenix better. "It's beautiful," breathed Hermione.

"Really nice," agreed Ron. "It must have been expensive, though, if the silver plating is real."

"It's real," said Harry. "I conjured some silver for them to use. I gave it to Molly to give to them, she told them that it was anonymously donated. Which is true, I suppose."

"Cool," said Ron. "It's great, but won't someone try to steal... oh, never mind, you'll have put up defenses around it. With what you can do now..."

"It's very safe, believe me," confirmed Harry. "Anyone who tries to steal it will get teleported to the confinement areas at Auror headquarters."

"That seems very efficient," commented Neville. "Ah, here's the dedication." Neville was looking at the text chiseled into the silver on the side he was currently facing. He read, "We honor those who gave their lives in this generation's struggle against evil. We recognize that the struggle continues, and vow to remain vigilant. We fight, not only with magic and bravery, but also by forging bonds of friendship among ourselves, and between ourselves and others. We must never forget those who have fallen, especially when we face the choice between what is easy and what is right."

"That's very good," said Hermione. "That last phrase, is it from what Albus said when Voldemort came back?"

Harry nodded. "I do have some influence, it turns out. I did my best to make sure that phrase got in there. Molly kept an eye on it for me. Considering that this had to be approved by committees, I'm amazed the wording came out as well as it did."

"It wasn't easy," said Molly, who had been one of the leaders of the group of the relatives of Voldemort's victims; the group had been instrumental in pushing

the project through the Ministry so quickly. “There were all kinds of squabbles. For example, Raymond Turpin objected to the phrase ‘gave their lives,’ he thought it should be ‘lost their lives.’ Fortunately, most people preferred what ended up there. I just hope people who read it in the future take the words seriously.”

“I hope so too,” agreed Harry. “One thing I do know is that I’m going to find a way to work those ideas into my lectures.”

“If students will take them seriously from anyone, it’s you,” said Ron. Harry glanced at Ron with appreciation; it wasn’t often that Ron said something like that. Ron nodded his acknowledgment, then busied himself in reading the other sides of the statue’s base. “So, these are the names of everyone killed by Voldemort or the Death Eaters?”

“Yes,” said Molly. “Both from this time, and seventeen years ago. The total ended up being four hundred and twenty-four.”

“Harry!” exclaimed Hermione. “Sirius’s name is here! I’m surprised, I thought he was still considered to have been guilty.”

“He was, officially, but Bright knew better,” said Harry. “He knew how important Sirius was to me, and as a favor, he made sure Sirius’s name got here. Even if he only did it to get my goodwill, I still appreciated it.”

Ginny found Neville’s grandmother’s name, and asked, “Neville, did they ask you if you wanted your parents’ names here?”

Neville nodded. “I thought about it, but it just didn’t seem right, since they’re still alive. I know it’s as though they were killed, but still...”

Harry scanned the names, lingering on the ones he recognized. Lisa Turpin, Percy Weasley, Sarah Dentus, Thomas Dalton, Cedric Diggory, Blaise Zabini, Ernie Macmillan. The names brought memories flooding back. So many names, he thought. This had such a high cost. Thank God my friends came through it all right, but not everyone I cared about did. Sirius, and... ah, there it is. Albus Dumbledore. If anyone gave his life rather than lost it, it was him.

Harry found the ones he was looking for: James Potter, Lily Potter. Oddly, he found a blank space before 'James Potter', enough space for one name. "What's this?" he asked, pointing it out to Molly and Hermione, who were nearest him.

"Well, that wasn't my idea," admitted Molly, "and I know you may not care for it, but most people wanted it there, and I think it's appropriate. The names are in alphabetical order, and this is... kind of a silent tribute, a celebration of something that didn't happen." She paused, but Harry didn't know what she meant.

She looked at Harry, love in her eyes. "The blank space is for the one who was supposed to have died, but didn't. The Boy Who Lived."

The End