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CHAPTER 4

RETURN TO PRIVET DRIVE

Heading toward the Apparation detection room, Harry was intercepted by Ron in the standby area. Looking apprehensive, Ron said, “Harry, could you—”

“You want to be checked,” Harry confirmed as Ron nodded. “Okay, I’ll get Kingsley, just a minute.”

A look at the clock showed two minutes to midnight. Harry found Kingsley. “Do you have a minute?”

“Right now, just a minute. What is it?”

“I’m not going to do this every night, but I was working with Ron today on this, and we think it’s possible that he has it. We’d like to check him.”

Kingsley sighed in annoyance. “All right, but tonight during your standby time, I’m teaching you the testing spell, you can check him from now on.” They walked into the standby room.

Kingsley cast the spell on himself as they walked. They found Ron, and with no preliminary chat, Kingsley said to Ron simply, “Hit me.” Ron fired, and a gold 100 appeared. Ron smiled and clenched a fist in triumph. Kingsley raised his eyebrows. “Well done. Okay, Ron, you know the drill. Noon tomorrow. I’m too busy right now, I’ll check you for the actual spell then.” He walked back to the detection room.

Smiling, Harry walked to Ron and put an arm around his shoulders. “Congratulations. I’m really happy for you.” He leaned closer to Ron and whispered, “I’d give you a kiss, but you know, all these people...”

Ron laughed. “Right now, I’m so happy, I wouldn’t care. Thank you, Harry, for everything.”

“Happy to do it.” Harry clasped Ron’s shoulder, then walked to the detection room. He met Pansy, who was getting ready to leave. “How was the shift?”

“Kind of boring, really. No Apparations, just looked at maps.” Noting his smile, she asked. “What are you so happy about?”

“Ron’ll tell you.”

She broke into a wide smile. “Oh, he did it! That’s so great! Thank you for helping him, Harry.” She hurried out to meet Ron.

Harry was on ready status for the first part of his shift; he tried to focus, to be ready to Disapparate at a moment’s notice, but he kept drifting back to Ron’s having achieved the use of the energy of love. Now that he had successfully taught all five of his friends, the question of whether, how, and under what circumstances to teach Hogwarts students loomed larger. He knew he had to decide soon, because consultations with parents, and perhaps scheduling considerations, had to be taken into account. He imagined what Snape’s reaction would be if he were told that he had to re-do the schedule.

He eventually was able to focus better on the map displays. Thirty-five minutes later, for the first time in over a day, there was an Apparation. Harry quickly looked at the maps, and Disapparated. The first thing he saw was Dawlish, already there, with his wand out. Harry thought he saw something flying away from a hooded figure, but he couldn’t see it well.

Reflexively, Harry put down an anti-Disapparation field as Aurors fired on the figure, who went down under a barrage of Stunning spells. ‘Yes!’ exulted Harry mentally as Aurors rushed to the man, having already wrapped him in ropes. A few Aurors congratulated Dawlish, whose reaction was a grunt. “Let’s get him back, and get out of here,” said Dawlish.

Harry Apparated back in time to see that, as usual, the standby team had moved into the detection room as soon as the Apparation had happened, ready to

rush off to assist. Harry exchanged a smile of triumph with Ginny as Kingsley announced, “We got one. Hubert was out there in zero point nine seconds, the first one to break one second.” Harry saw the Aurors make impressed sounds and expressions; Harry knew himself how hard it was to even get close to one second.

Dawlish shrugged. “He was too slow Summoning the Portkey. Well, now’s a good time for my nap.” He walked off. Harry asked other Aurors about what had happened, and was told that they suspected that one factor assisting the capture was that the Death Eater had chosen too small an object as the Portkey. If it was so small that it couldn’t be seen easily, and the Death Eater didn’t remember exactly where it had been placed, the slight delay that could cause might be enough to allow the capture. Harry assumed that when Dawlish had arrived the Portkey had already been Summoned by the Death Eater; to interrupt it, the Auror had to redirect it away before it could be caught by the Death Eater, and he had to be stronger than the Death Eater.

The rest of Harry’s first three hours was uneventful, and at three o’clock he walked to the standby area, briefly clasp hands with Ginny as they passed. He looked for Kingsley, who spent fifteen minutes teaching him the spell which detected how much of one’s potential one was using when doing spells silently. Kingsley then did a test, which showed the usual 100.

“Thanks, Kingsley,” said Harry. “I would have had to learn this anyway, since I’m teaching the N.E.W.T. classes this year. Not to mention for any classes where I might try to teach the energy of love. Which I still don’t know if I’m going to do or not.”

“That reminds me, Harry... has McGonagall, or Dumbledore, talked to you about your future recently?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, they want me to stay, maybe be headmaster someday. They both told me.”

Kingsley looked at him carefully. “It seems the idea doesn’t thrill you.”

“It’s an honor, of course, but... this is what I want to do. I mean, I do understand their point. I’ll probably be able to teach the energy of love better than anyone else. But that doesn’t change the fact that I’d rather do this.”

“I know, Harry. And we’re happy that this is what you want. The truth is, when Dumbledore first talked to me about this, I started getting a bit hot under the collar. We thought we had you for sure; I felt like the rug was being yanked out from under me. But he made sense, in that damnable way he had... or at least, it was damnable if you didn’t like what he was saying. Not only is it true that you’ll be able to teach it best, but he was also right when he said that your stature would matter there more than here. Kids will go to Hogwarts to be taught by Harry Potter, who repeatedly defied Voldemort, and discovered this extremely useful new type of magic. Winston’s told me that his daughter’s told him how you’re regarded by the students. I can see why that would be very valuable for Hogwarts, and for the students.

“If you end up with us, we’ll be very pleased. But I want to make sure you know that if you don’t, we’ll understand why, and we won’t hold it against you.” He paused, then added, deadpan, “We’ll hold it against Dumbledore.” Kingsley then smiled, and so did Harry. “I’m glad he’s not totally gone, I feel like I can make jokes like that. Anyway... you could still sort of be with us part-time, like in the summers, and for special situations like this. That would be when we could use you most, anyway. We had that kind of relationship with Dumbledore. I know you don’t have to make a decision anytime soon, but I wanted to let you know where we stood on this. You must think about it sometimes; I know it’s a big decision.”

“These days, I try not to, and with stuff like this going on, it’s pretty easy not to,” replied Harry. “But I understand, and I appreciate what you said. I’m glad to know that I can at least be with you in some way, whatever I choose.

“By the way, I was wondering... when Dawlish caught that one, it was well into my shift, but he’s usually on the other shift. Is he changing shifts?”

Kingsley shrugged. “Not really. He’s just... drifting a bit. I gave you and Neville lectures about pacing yourselves, and we do make sure that most Aurors do twelve hours and no more. But Dawlish and I are the senior Aurors, and as such we can disregard the guidelines we give to others. We’ve both been doing more than twelve hours here and there. He told me he felt more ‘in the zone’ today, and it sure looks like he was right. He’ll probably sleep for six hours and come right back if he still feels in the zone. It’s almost like being an athlete, in a way. Most of us here are performing at a very high level—including you, your one point four, one point five is very impressive for an Auror, never mind an inexperienced one—and it’s really hard to do better once you’ve done the best you can. Where you are mentally is the key, which is why it’s so stressful to be at the ready for so long. A tenth of a second can be the difference between catching someone and not catching them, as you just saw. Dawlish is the best we have, so if he wants to do more and thinks he can pace himself, I’m not going to quibble with him.”

“Just curious,” Harry assured Kingsley, not wanting him to think that he was making judgments about how the Aurors did things. “Well, I’m going to get started on my drills.” He got up.

“Oh, and Harry... happy birthday,” said Kingsley, with the barest smile.

“Wow, I forgot all about that,” said Harry. “Thanks. Funny, my birthday’s never been such a happy occasion for me, since I was always stuck with my Muggle relatives at the time. Probably everyone would be making a big fuss about it if this wasn’t going on. I’m just happy to be doing something useful.” Harry walked off and started his response-time drills.

There were no Apparations during Ginny’s three hours on ready status, and Harry went back into the main room at six o’clock. He remembered what Kingsley had said about the mental aspect of this being the most important, and he started to wonder if there was some way he could improve his performance in that area. He kept focused on the wall as he thought; he thought of himself as a sprinter waiting for the gun to sound so he could leap out of the starting blocks.

At five minutes after seven the red lights on the wall lit up, and maps were instantly displayed. Harry had known before that specific addresses could be displayed as well, but often were not, since the Death Eaters mostly chose relatively abandoned areas that didn't have street addresses; usually the only text on the wall was the name of the city, and perhaps the neighborhood. But now, something extremely familiar was displayed: the text read, Surrey, Little Whinging, 4 Privet Drive, Living Room. Seeing this, Harry reacted instantaneously; he suddenly found himself in the Dursleys' living room.

Harry was in the center of the living room. He could see the three Dursleys at the kitchen table, and there was a hooded figure between Harry and them. The first thing he heard after he Apparated was the word "Kedavra!" spoken by the hooded figure, and he saw the green bolt flying at Dudley. Again acting by pure reflex, Harry performed three spells in quick succession, in less than a second. First, without his conscious thought, he put up a Killing Curse shield around Dudley. Harry then deployed an anti-Disapparation field as the hooded figure whirled in surprise to look at the source of the shield. To Harry's shock, the hooded figure was Draco Malfoy. As Aurors started Apparating in, Harry shot off a Stunning spell at Malfoy, who was now trying to Disapparate. The spell hit Malfoy, who was lifted off his feet and thrown back two yards, his back slamming into the solid oak kitchen table. He fell to the ground in obvious pain.

Petunia and Vernon were speechless, in shock at what had happened, and the suddenness of it. Dudley's expression turned from shock to outrage as he got to his feet and stood over Malfoy. He looked at Harry. "That was a Killing Curse, wasn't it?" he asked Harry, almost accusingly, though Harry knew Dudley's anger was directed at Malfoy. Harry nodded. Furious, Dudley looked at the prone Malfoy and suddenly kicked his head. Stunned, Harry didn't move as two Aurors leaped forward; Dudley got in one more very solid-sounding kick before being restrained by Aurors as Malfoy howled in pain. Harry suddenly felt pleased at what Dudley had done; he knew the feeling was unworthy, but couldn't help feeling it.

Two more Aurors pulled Malfoy to his feet, Malfoy bleeding from one cut on his cheek and from his mouth. Harry walked forward, stopping right in front of Malfoy. Seeing Malfoy's expression of rage and pain, Harry had a sudden idea. Already holding his wand, Harry silently cast Legilimens. He found his way into Malfoy's mind very quickly, and looked not for feelings, but for memories having to do with his mission. He saw an image of Voldemort talking to Malfoy, then Malfoy talking to his father, followed by an image of Malfoy in a deserted area setting up a Portkey and activating it.

Malfoy's eyes widened in alarm as he realized what Harry was doing. He started to say something, but Harry cut him off, speaking first. Turning to the Aurors, his tone conveying his surprise, Harry said, "This wasn't authorized! This isn't what he was supposed to do!" Malfoy's expression was one of anger and increasing panic.

Kingsley walked up to Harry. "What's he doing here, then? I mean, it's not like Death Eaters run around disobeying orders."

"No, they don't," agreed Harry, who found himself smiling at Malfoy. "He thought he could get away with it, though. He was supposed to go straight to the Portkey, like usual. What he decided to do was come here, kill Dudley, and go from here to the Portkey." Now staring in satisfaction at Malfoy, he continued, "It never occurred to him that because I used to live here, I'd be able to get here way faster than he thought anyone would. He was going to not even tell the Death Eaters what he'd done! He was going to just pretend it was a routine, successful mission. Voldemort would've known anyway, of course, but Malfoy here's so full of himself he didn't understand that."

Harry moved closer to Malfoy, his face a foot away from Malfoy's. Malfoy's expression vacillated between anger and fear; Harry's was hard, pitiless. "Too bad we can't just send him back," said Harry, never breaking eye contact with Malfoy. "Voldemort doesn't like failure, Malfoy, and he likes his orders disobeyed even less. If you ever manage to get back to him, what he'll do to you will make what Neville

went through look like a stubbed toe by comparison.” Malfoy flinched in fear just a little, despite obviously trying hard not to react to what Harry said.

“All right,” said Kingsley, looking slightly bewildered, “everybody head on back, get him out of here. Harry and I will be along, we just need to talk to Harry’s relatives.”

As the Aurors started to move Malfoy away, Harry remembered something else. “Oh, Kingsley,” he said, wanting to say it while Malfoy was still around, “one thing Malfoy was also kind enough to recall was that the magic number is three.” Again with satisfaction, Harry saw Malfoy wearing a definitely panicked expression. “If three of them in a row get caught, Voldemort will give up, and we win. At least, that’s what Malfoy’s been told.”

Kingsley frowned in puzzlement. “That doesn’t sound like the kind of thing they’d tell someone like him.”

“They’ didn’t,” Harry explained. “Voldemort told his father, and his father told him. Good to know they have security problems.”

“Yes, I’d say so,” agreed Kingsley as Aurors started Disapparating, one escorting Malfoy. Harry and Kingsley turned to the Dursleys. Petunia and Vernon were still in mild shock, but Dudley’s expression was close to normal. Harry glanced at the table, which he noticed was different from the one they’d had when he was last there.

“Nice table,” remarked Harry. “When’d you get it?”

“Christmas,” replied Dudley. “Yeah, it is. Very solid.”

“Yes, that came in handy,” said Harry. “You know, the Weasleys have one like this, except it cleans and puts away—”

“Harry,” chided Kingsley, “you’ll have to catch up some other time. Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, I’m sorry that we couldn’t have prevented this from happening. Fortunately, no harm was done—”

“No harm?” repeated a suddenly outraged Vernon. “Our breakfast is interrupted by a wand-wielding maniac who almost kills our son, who you are supposed to be protecting, and you say no harm was done?”

“He meant that no one was hurt or killed,” said Harry helpfully. Vernon gave Harry the same dirty look Harry had seen many times before, especially on the occasions when he had mouthed off to Vernon.

“And they did protect me,” pointed out Dudley. “I am still alive.”

“Just barely!” shrieked Petunia, still shaken. “He was just suddenly... there, and doing that curse! Dudley was a half of a second away from death! Can’t you do anything about that?”

Harry had a sudden thought. “Couldn’t I put an anti-Disapparation plot around the house, like the one at the Weasleys?”

“Yes, that would be the only real solution,” agreed Kingsley. “If you like, we’ll do that.” To their blank expressions, Kingsley explained, “It’s a spell that can be done to a specific area of land. When it’s finished, no one can enter or leave the area the way Malfoy just did, the way we did.”

“That sounds all right,” said Petunia. “Then, do that now, please.”

“I’m sorry, we can’t do it right now,” said Kingsley. “First of all, it takes a few hours, and secondly, Harry is extremely busy right now, working with us in a crisis situation. Thirdly, he’ll have to be protected while he does it, which is a use of manpower we can’t afford. He can do it after the crisis is over.”

“Why does he have to do it?” asked Vernon. “Couldn’t any of you do it? Someone who wasn’t so busy and wouldn’t have to be protected?”

“Any of us could do it,” agreed Kingsley, “but the stronger the wizard, the more effective the plot will be. In terms of raw power, Harry is the strongest wizard we have.”

Petunia and Vernon’s eyebrows went high. “He’s only seventeen! How did that happen?” asked Petunia.

“Oh, I know! It’s that energy-of-love thing, right?” asked Dudley, who snickered immediately after he said it.

Harry looked at Dudley, amused. “Real mature, Dudley.”

“Well, you have to admit, it sounds kind of stupid,” replied Dudley.

“I can see why you would say that,” admitted Harry, “but it may seem less stupid if you consider that without it, you’d be dead right now.” Dudley made a ‘hadn’t thought of that’ expression. “Anyway, I’d be happy to do it as soon as I can, but Kingsley’s right, it can’t be until the crisis is over.” Harry gave a brief summary of what was happening, finishing with, “If we get lucky the next time this happens, it could be over in a few days. But we just can’t say.”

“That is unacceptable!” shouted Petunia. “This could happen again any time!”

“It’s not going to happen, Aunt Petunia,” said Harry before Kingsley could comment. To her doubtful expression, he continued, “All right, I can’t say it’s absolutely impossible, but really, it’s not going to happen. Malfoy’s the only one of them who gave a damn about Dudley, and we have him now. The other ones don’t even know he did this, so they’re not going to come here to finish it. Also, Voldemort didn’t authorize it, and most Death Eaters aren’t so stupid as to disobey his orders. It’s just not going to happen.”

“You didn’t think this would happen, either, obviously,” argued Petunia.

“Mrs. Dursley,” said Kingsley patiently, “as you heard Harry explain, the nature of the crisis is such that we are monitoring all Apparation very closely. In the extremely unlikely event that someone did this again, we would respond very quickly.”

“Quickly enough to save Dudley?” asked Petunia suspiciously. Gesturing to Harry, she said, “He was faster than the rest of you. He was here first, he was the only one who got here in time. And I thought he was the only one who could do those spells. What if it happened while he was asleep?” Harry now realized that Petunia had definitely read the articles she had been sent for the past year.

“My friends can do them too,” Harry said. “They’re helping with the crisis as well. As for my getting here fast, as you heard me say to Malfoy, it’s because I lived here. I don’t need to figure out where it is. The others who know the spell couldn’t have gotten here this fast. Now, what we could do is, and it wouldn’t take long... I could bring them over here, show them through the house, the yard, the backyard... if they’ve been here, in every room, then they could get here as fast as I could.”

“I’m not going to have a bunch of these... people tromping through my home!” shouted Petunia indignantly.

“Well, that’s the only way to make sure Dudley’s completely safe from this kind of... oh, wait, there is another way. He could stay at the Burrow until the crisis is over. There’s an extra bed, I’m sure Molly wouldn’t mind.”

Dudley’s eyes lit up, but Petunia stared daggers at Harry. “Are you trying to be funny?”

“No, he’s right,” said Kingsley thoughtfully. “He’d be totally safe there, and Molly’s very nice, and a good parent, it would be all right with them, I’m sure.”

Petunia continued to stare at Harry. “This isn’t funny.”

“What’s the problem?” asked Kingsley.

“To say they don’t like magic and wizards is a major understatement,” explained Harry to Kingsley. “She doesn’t want Dudley in a magical environment.”

Petunia and Vernon looked somewhat abashed at this having been said right in front of them. Good, Harry thought. “Oh,” said Kingsley. “Then why did you suggest him staying there, if you knew that?”

“To point out to Aunt Petunia that there are worse things than having a few wizards ‘tromping’ through her home,” he said, staring at Petunia.

She gave him a particularly nasty look before sighing in surrender. “When do they need to come, and how soon can it be done?”

Harry looked at Kingsley. “Today, shift change? I can get Ron and Pansy to come in fifteen minutes early, give them the tour, let them do a few test

Apparations, make sure their times are okay, then do the same with Ginny after they're done.”

“Yes, that sounds fine,” agreed Kingsley. To the Dursleys, he said, “We’ll need to be here from eleven forty-five to twelve-thirty.”

“I’ll be out doing errands,” sniffed Petunia. “Dudley, you can come with me.”

“Nah, I’ll stay here. Make sure they don’t break anything.” Harry and Dudley exchanged a glance, both knowing that Dudley was joking.

“They’d better not,” grumbled Petunia.

“We’ll be very careful not to disturb anything, Mrs. Dursley,” Kingsley assured her. “We’ll leave now, and you can get on with your breakfast. Ready, Harry?”

Harry nodded and prepared to Disapparate. Dudley said, “Oh, Harry... happy birthday.”

Harry grinned. “Thanks,” he said, then waved goodbye and Disapparated.

Delighted, Ginny walked up to Harry and grabbed his shoulders. “You got Malfoy! That’s so great!”

“Yeah, it is,” agreed Harry. “I can’t wait to tell Pansy.”

Kingsley took a few steps over, standing next to Harry. “It is great, Ginny, but while you’re on ready status—”

“Looking at the wall, being ready,” acknowledged Ginny, turning to look at the maps. “Sorry.”

“It’s understandable,” said Kingsley. “Would you stay out here a few more minutes? I need to talk to Harry.”

Ginny agreed, and Harry and Kingsley walked out to the standby room and sat down; Kingsley chose a spot where they couldn’t easily be overheard. “First of all, congratulations. That was a tremendous performance. I checked, and you got out there in zero point five seconds.”

“Yeah, but that was only because I knew the place.”

“No, that’s a very good time even if you know where you’re going, and especially considering you didn’t expect to be going anyplace you knew. You have really good reflexes. Also, the speed with which you acted once you got out there was excellent. I got there fast enough to see that you were one step ahead of Malfoy all the way.”

Harry shrugged. “He’s not that great a wizard.”

“By which I assume you mean, he’s not as good as you,” Kingsley noted wryly. “Now, there is something else... not a big problem, but something I want to make sure you’re aware of—”

Harry nodded, figuring Kingsley would bring it up. “I enjoyed myself a bit too much.”

“Yes, but I see you’re aware of it, that’s good. I don’t blame you, Harry. I know your history with him. Most of us don’t have a *bête noire*.” Seeing Harry’s puzzled expression, Kingsley explained, “It means, like a personal enemy.”

Harry chuckled mildly. “This is part of being Harry Potter. Most people don’t have one; I have two.”

“That’s true. One for your childhood, one as an adult... and since you’re right on the bridge between the two, you deal with both of them these days. Anyway, it’s entirely possible that full-fledged Aurors in your situation would have acted the same way. It would be hard not to make it personal when someone’s tried several times to kill you, tortured your partner and a good friend, and so on. Hell, I might have done the same thing. I just wanted to be sure you knew that it wasn’t exactly by-the-book Auror behavior in that kind of situation. But it seems like you understand that.”

“Yes, I do. Even at the time, I understood that I really shouldn’t have been like that. But it was such a good opportunity, I couldn’t resist, especially since it was me personally that got him. That reminds me, I wondered after I did it, did I break any laws by pulling the information out of him like that?”

“Technically, yes,” answered Kingsley, “but Aurors are allowed a great deal of leeway in that kind of situation, and you’re functioning as an Auror right now, so there’d be no consequences. I was going to bring that up, but for another reason. Most Legilimens don’t let it be known that they are. Are you planning to let everybody know, or did you do that only because there were just Aurors, and you know they won’t let it get around?”

“I hadn’t thought about it, really. I think the main reason I said it the way I did was because of Malfoy. I—”

“You were gloating,” observed Kingsley, not unkindly.

“I guess so,” Harry admitted. “He knew I had pulled it out anyway, of course, the other person sees the memory as you do. I just wanted him to see... yes, I suppose ‘gloating’ is a pretty good word for it. I could have told you all that stuff back at headquarters later, I didn’t have to tell you then.” Harry was starting to feel a bit embarrassed.

“Yes, which is another point. Again, Harry, this is not to give you a hard time, but to make sure you know certain things. Aurors can be trusted, but in that kind of situation it’s proper procedure to give information like that to the senior Auror privately as soon as possible, unless it’s time-sensitive. It’s then for the senior Auror to decide what’s to be shared and what’s not.”

“I understand,” said Harry quietly, hoping that Kingsley would find no more breaches of proper Auror behavior to point out to him.

Apparently, Kingsley did not. “What’s the problem with your aunt and uncle, anyway? They were strange, even given what had happened to them. Are they like that just because they don’t like magic?”

“Yes. That was good behavior, for them. They were only that polite because they were talking to the people who were hopefully going to keep Dudley safe; they’re afraid that if they totally alienate the Aurors, we won’t protect Dudley. Normally, they would have had a long, screaming fit over what happened, blaming you, me, the magical world, and so on.”

Kingsley shook his head. “That was the other strange thing... you saved their son’s life, you’d think they could manage to say ‘thank you.’”

“Nope. The way they see it, I, or my presence, is the only reason Dudley’s in any danger in the first place. So even if I save his life, it’s a wash, because I was responsible for his danger.”

Kingsley was incredulous. “You must be kidding.”

“Fraid not.”

“Quite a life you’ve had. Oh, one other thing. When you were talking about showing the Dursleys’ house to the others, you didn’t mention Hermione. Do you know something that I don’t?”

“No, not exactly, but I just assumed she wouldn’t be back yet. Now that we have Ron and Pansy for the noon-to-midnight shift, and she suffered a lot in the past two days, I thought she might need a few days off.”

“Yes, I was thinking that too,” said Kingsley. “I just wanted to make sure that there wasn’t anything I didn’t know. Okay, well, let’s get back to it.”

As Neville had been, Harry was treated to cake and birthday wishes during his last standby shift. He also got many congratulations for his capture of Malfoy, and his protestations that it wasn’t that much since he knew the house were met with good-natured scoffing. He was pleased at the compliments, but what meant more was the thought that if they caught the next one, it would be over.

He thought about what he could do to improve his time; it was difficult to think of anything. He knew he had excellent reflexes, and his relatively good times were mostly due to that, but he just hadn’t been looking at maps long enough to know them well enough to improve his times. Dawlish, by comparison, had excellent reflexes and near-total recall, Harry had been told, and so barely needed to look at the first two maps at all.

Harry wondered if there was some way he could ‘cheat,’ as he put it in his mind. He remembered the first time he had Apparated by looking at maps; he had

not known exactly where Cassandra was, but he had ended up mere inches from her, having intended simply to end up as close to her as possible. Had that been chance, or could it be duplicated? If so, how?

He considered the idea of giving quicker looks to the first two maps, and maybe just an extremely short glance at the third, hoping that intuition, or whatever had guided him so close to Cassandra, would put him where he wanted to go. He knew it was a risk, though: if he was wrong, he could end up far outside the target area, maybe too far to see or help others under attack. He reminded himself that his was technically a support role; he was expected to protect the ones who went out, not necessarily do any capturing himself. But on the other hand, the next attempt would be very important; if it was successful, the Apparation crisis would probably be over. Harry debated what to do. He wouldn't have to decide until the next day, he realized, as Ginny was on ready status for the last three hours of their shift.

At ten minutes after eleven she called him on her hand; she needed to go to the bathroom, and the one on standby always filled in for that time, even though it was only a few minutes. He took her place as she headed off. Three minutes later, out of the corner of his eye he saw her heading back. As he thought about returning to the standby area, the alarms went off and the walls lit up. Harry made an instant decision to use the riskier method, knowing that if he missed the mark substantially it would not be disastrous, since Ginny would follow in a few seconds. He took glances at the first two maps, barely looked at the third one at all, and Disapparated, trusting his instincts, or fate, to take him where he wanted to go.

He appeared in a field containing mostly weeds, but the first thing he noticed was something hitting his head. Knocked off balance, he tried to right himself as he noticed a soccer ball rising in the air above him; he realized that was what had hit him. He heard multiple Apparation sounds, and then from behind him, what sounded like someone hitting the ground. Recovering his balance, he turned to see the hooded Death Eater sprawled unconscious, as the soccer ball fell to the ground a few feet away.

Dawlish and a few other Aurors approached Harry as he looked around, slightly befuddled. “Looks like you got him, but I didn’t see how it happened,” admitted Harry.

“I think you mean, ‘we’ got him,” replied Dawlish, amused at Harry’s confusion. “Let’s go back, and we’ll see if I can explain it to you.” He Disapparated, and as he saw two Aurors pick up the fallen Death Eater, Harry followed.

Harry appeared in the detection room as the Aurors were returning. He saw Dawlish nod at Kingsley, who smiled and announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, we have our third consecutive capture!” Harry heard cheers and sounds of triumph, and he smiled as Ginny put an arm around his waist.

“And the times,” Kingsley continued, “when I saw these times, I had a feeling we had a capture. Hubert Dawlish reached the scene in zero point nine seconds... and Harry Potter reached the scene in zero point eight seconds.” There was a gasp, and Ginny gaped at him; Harry suddenly felt very self-conscious.

Dawlish now addressed the room. “That’s not even the strange thing,” he said. “The strange thing is where he ended up. The Death Eater had Summoned the Portkey, which was a soccer ball; when I got there, it had just hit Harry in the head. Somehow, he Apparated right in the path of the ball. I would’ve been there just in time to miss a capture, but as it was, we were able to Stun him. If Harry hadn’t landed on that exact spot, the Death Eater would have made it. So, Harry, I think I’m not the only one curious to know how you did that.”

“I’m kind of curious myself,” he said. “I did do something different; I decided to look at maps less and trust... intuition, instinct, fate, I don’t know... more. I knew it was a little risky, but I thought, this may be the chance to end it, so I did it. I really don’t know how to explain it better than that.”

There was silence for a second, then an Auror said, “The energy of love strikes again.” Most everyone laughed, but Harry couldn’t help but wonder if there was any truth in it.

Aurors resumed chatting, and a celebratory atmosphere prevailed, although the Aurors were still serious about their tasks, ready to Disapparate. Harry turned to Ginny, whose pendant was blinking pink. She spoke into it, then looked at Harry. “Pansy was just letting me know, she and Ron will be here in ten minutes or so. They’re coming a little early.”

Kingsley stepped over and tapped Harry on the shoulder. “It’s less than an hour, but you should go ahead and take the rest of the shift off. You can visit with Neville and Hermione, they’re in Neville’s quarters. If there’s another Apparation, you’ll hear the alarms.” Harry thanked Kingsley, said goodbye to Ginny, and left.

Harry knocked on the door to Neville’s temporary quarters, and the door was opened by Hermione. “Harry!” she squealed happily as she wrapped him in a hug.

Harry was mystified for a moment, then understood. “I guess you heard about Malfoy.”

“News travels fast around here,” said Neville, as Hermione kissed Harry’s cheek, then let him go. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” said Harry. “So, how are you two doing?”

Neville and Hermione glanced at each other, their expressions suggesting that it wouldn’t be easy to put the answer into words. “It’s been a long night, and I guess you could say, emotionally exhausting,” said Neville. “But this helped a lot,” he added, gesturing to the Pensieve. “I know it’s not only you, it was Gran and Albus too, but I want to thank you for helping to get it to me. It made today a whole lot less difficult.” Neville looked at Harry with great affection.

“I was happy to do it, Neville. I’m glad it helped. It’s funny, I felt a little like I shouldn’t have watched it, because it was really private, even though I know that you can’t watch it if I don’t. I felt like crying when I saw it, and it wasn’t even for me.”

Neville nodded. “After I saw it for the first time, I cried for, like, a half hour.” Harry understood that it was an indication of Neville’s trust and confidence

in him that he would tell Harry something like that. “I think some of it was sadness, some was happiness that she didn’t really die, if you know what I mean, and some of it was just all the emotion in this situation. Then I called Hermione and asked her to come over. I knew I had to show her what was in there.”

“Then when I saw it,” said Hermione, “I cried for a long time, too. I was happy for Neville, still sad that he’d lost his grandmother, guilty for things I said, the way I acted... we talked about it, and cried together... lots of crying in this room tonight. What his grandmother said about our relationship, it made so much sense, but we hadn’t thought about it like that. In a way, we hadn’t thought about it at all. You know, just living day to day, you don’t think to talk about the way your relationship is going unless you have a problem. I mean, I’ll bet you and Ginny haven’t sat down and had a conversation about what your relationship is like.”

“No, we haven’t,” said Harry.

Hermione nodded. “I wouldn’t think most people would. Anyway, we’ve spent a lot of the past nine hours talking about this. I was really grateful that his grandmother said the things she did about him and me, because I was so scared about what might happen. You know I was extremely angry at what Skeeter said in those letters, I still am, but I couldn’t deny that there was some truth to them. I knew in some ways I hadn’t treated Neville very well, and you know I was terrified I might lose him.” Hermione’s voice started to reflect some of the emotion of what she had gone through. “I told him today that I would beg, I would plead, I would grovel if that was what it took for him to stay with me.” Harry’s eyebrows rose involuntarily as she spoke. She continued, “He didn’t make me, of course, but I would have. You’re wondering why I would say that to you, Harry, even if I would say it to Neville. It’s for the same reason Ron told you he loved you. I want myself, and Neville, to know that I’m willing to say that to another person, that I accept the... giving up my pride, loss of control, whatever you want to call it. That I don’t have to be in control all the time, have all the power. I always have, although I didn’t realize it. Neville always worried that he wasn’t good enough for me, but I never

worried. Then after the letters, I started to worry that I wasn't good enough for him, and like I said, it terrified me. Or, as Muggles say, it put the fear of God into me. I don't want to be like I have been. Like, with the Legilimency thing. I compromised my privacy to help you, and I don't regret that, but I compromised Neville's, too, without asking him, and I shouldn't have done that. It wasn't that I didn't respect him enough to—I just thought it would be easier for him not to know—but I understand now that that's how it could seem, and I should have asked him."

"In a way," said Neville, "the Legilimency thing was the worst thing in the letter. I mean, once I got over the shock of losing Gran, and the rest of what happened, I knew full well that Hermione would never want anything to happen to Gran. And the training thing, well, that wasn't great, and she did apologize—"

"One of the longer and more humble apologies," said Hermione, with an expression that showed her unhappiness at what she had done. "I think I've apologized more today than I have for everything else in my life, combined."

"Well, anyway," continued Neville, mildly embarrassed, "I do know that many women say that, it just kind of hurt more in my case, for obvious reasons. But the Legilimency thing was..." Neville trailed off.

"Neville is coming up to a part of the sentence where it would be critical of me, and he feels bad, since I've already apologized so much," said Hermione wryly. "It was typical of how I've dealt with him, my always thinking I know what's best, and assuming I should make decisions for him without his consent. I can see why that hurt him a lot, it is kind of a betrayal of trust. I mean, my intentions were good, but..."

"You know, Harry, I don't blame you for any of that," Neville assured him. "It seemed like you were looking kind of guilty there. It's not your job to ask her if it's okay with me to do that. But I know what her reasons were, and yes, I'll be kind of embarrassed if you see certain things. And I understand there are aspects of the

situation that I'm not supposed to know about. But she could have just told me that, instead of telling me nothing at all."

Hermione nodded. "I should have. And I feel bad about it, Harry, but after talking about it with Neville, I have to modify part of what I promised you. From now on when we do Legilimency, there will be one memory that I'll have to put in the Pensieve every time. I am sorry about that, to you and to Ginny, but it really is necessary."

Harry shook his head, dismissing her apology. "My first reaction is, only one? I'm sure Ginny and I both understand that Neville's needs are part of this, too. Besides, the time when your gesture was most needed and appreciated has passed."

"Yes, that's true," agreed Hermione, who Harry knew could not elaborate for fear of giving Neville information he wasn't supposed to know. "I still feel bad, though, for promising something I couldn't deliver on."

"Really, don't worry about it," he assured her. "Ginny and I won't, I promise." Remembering something she'd said in passing, he asked, "Ron told you about that?"

"Yes, he stayed with me yesterday afternoon until I fell asleep," explained Hermione. "He was really nice. He told me all about what you two did. I was impressed that he did it, and even more impressed that he told me all about it. He said it was to 'embrace his embarrassment,' as you put it, but I know it was also to keep my mind off things. It worked pretty well; what you guys did was really interesting. He says he wants it to stay within the six of us, but except for that, he doesn't care. And I heard it worked, he got his 100, so I was really happy for him."

As she finished the sentence, there was a knock at the door. Hermione walked over to get it, and Pansy and Ron walked in. Harry noticed that Pansy's pendant was blinking red. "Hi," said Ron. "Just so you know, Pansy has an open channel on her pendant to Ginny. She's still on ready status, but we want her to be able to hear us, since she's the only one not here. If she wants to say something, she'll say it to Harry, and he can tell us." Harry understood the reason; Ginny could

look at him in her hand while on ready status—his hand had started tingling when Ron and Pansy came in—and she could talk to him without making noise.

Pansy walked to Harry and put her hands on his shoulders. “I heard about Malfoy, of course. I can’t tell you how happy I am, and how grateful. I’m not sure you can know what it means to me to have him out of the way.” She stepped forward, kissed him on the cheek, and gave him a long hug. Embarrassed, he smiled as she finally let go.

He listened as he heard Ginny speak in his head, then chuckled. “Ginny says that you can thank me even more than that if you want,” he said, as the others laughed. “I think she likes seeing me embarrassed.”

“I think we already knew that,” said Ron. “I’d like to congratulate you too, Harry, though I’ll skip the hug and kiss, and just offer a manly handshake.”

Harry smiled and shook Ron’s hand as Pansy said, “Should we consider it significant that he feels the need to specifically mention how manly it is?”

Harry and Ron said ‘no’ as one. “You two would say that,” laughed Pansy.

“Actually, Harry, since the Pensieve is conveniently here, we were wondering if we could see what happened,” suggested Ron.

“Okay,” agreed Harry. “I’m actually wondering what you guys will think.” He put back the memory of Neville’s grandmother, and put in the memory of Malfoy’s capture, stopping it when the Aurors took Malfoy away. He watched it with them. Ginny couldn’t see, of course, but he knew he could show it to her anytime later.

Exiting the Pensieve, his friends looked at him with varying degrees of surprise. Neville was the first to speak. “Harry, do you think you were like that partly because of what happened to me and Hermione?”

“The thought crossed my mind,” agreed Harry. “It was probably that, what he did to Pansy and Ginny, and just his being Malfoy for the past six years.”

“Well, obviously, I loved it,” said a grinning Ron. “I could watch it a dozen times, it was so cool. The funny thing is... it occurred to me that it’s not really in

keeping with what we talked about yesterday. But I'd have been disappointed if you hadn't done it the way you did. After everything Malfoy's done to us, I think we deserve to watch him squirm."

Harry couldn't argue with Ron about that. "It never occurred to me in the situation, but I don't think I could have helped myself anyway, it was so good. Finally, after all this time, I have Malfoy in my power, I was the one who caught him, I could just invade his memories and take some at will, use the information to scare the hell out of him... I knew, on some level, that I shouldn't be like that, that it should just be that I was an Auror and he was a criminal. But, in the situation, I just couldn't. Not with him."

"Harry, I think you're holding yourself to the Dumbledore standard of behavior here," said Hermione. "Nobody in the world would blame you for doing what you did, knowing your past with him. Some people might say you restrained yourself well. You didn't kick him in the head, for example."

They all smiled. "Yeah, but you noticed I wasn't leaping up to stop it, either."

"Well, again, that's the Dumbledore standard," said Ron. "Yes, I was thinking, I'm beginning to rather like Dudley."

"Look, Harry, I enjoyed it, and I refuse to feel bad for enjoying it," put in Neville. "I especially liked how you mentioned what happened to me to threaten him, and how well it worked. In fact, I was thinking I'd give you a kiss too, like Pansy, but then I realized it wouldn't be very manly." The others all laughed, including Harry.

"Couldn't you just give him a manly kiss, Neville?" joked Pansy. "Of course, I'm with them, I could watch it a dozen times as well. You'll have to leave it in there sometime, Ron and I can make an evening of it."

"It's not like I'm totally proud of it, though," said Harry uncomfortably. "I mean, when you get right down to it, it was Schadenfreude. I was enjoying his pain, his fear, his helplessness."

“Harry,” said Neville in a tone that was, for him, unusually sharp. “What do you think about me for what I did to Lestrage?”

The starkness of Neville’s question took him aback. He thought for a few seconds. “You weren’t yourself, Neville.”

“So, you wouldn’t blame me for what I did. I know the situations were very different, but you have a lot of legitimate anger at Malfoy. And it was a surprise to see him there, you didn’t have time to prepare. Your emotions took over, and it’s understandable. And you wouldn’t want to make us feel bad about enjoying it, would you?”

Despite his discomfort, Harry smiled. “Of course not.” He held up a hand as he heard Ginny in his head. Still smiling, he said, “She says you guys are getting her all worked up, now she really wants to see it.” To her, he added, “I promise to show you as soon as we’re done at the Dursleys.” He then explained to the others what had to be done there.

“Harry, you forgot to mention me,” said Hermione. “I’ve never been to your place, I should go too.”

“It would probably be better if you took a few days off, Hermione,” said Harry, as Neville nodded his approval.

“Well, maybe,” she reluctantly agreed, “but I should do at least the first few hours of the next shift, so they can use the time to teach Ron and Pansy how to Apparate; neither knows yet.”

Harry sighed; her suggestion was reasonable, but there was another consideration, one he’d hoped not to have to bring up. “I understand, and that does make sense. But there’s another thing.” He took out his wand and cast on himself the measuring spell Kingsley had taught him. “Kingsley taught me this a while ago. Would you cast Blue on me?”

She looked both surprised and offended. “You think I can’t do it?”

“I think it’s possible,” he admitted. “You’ve been through a lot.”

She gave him a dirty look, then closed her eyes and tried to calm herself. She opened her eyes and cast Blue at him, silently. A gold 93 appeared in the air beside him. She put her wand away, walked to a wall, leaned against it, and started to sob. Neville walked over and held her as the others watched somberly. In Harry's head, Ginny asked him what her score was, and he told her. "Damn," he heard her say.

Miserable, Hermione held Neville and said, "This is because of Skeeter, obviously. Boy, I'm going to be stepping on every beetle I see for the rest of my life. You never know when you might get lucky."

Harry hated to say it, but knew he should. "Unfortunately, Hermione, it's that very kind of thinking—"

"I know that, Harry," she half-shouted, shooting him an angry look. "There's just nothing else in me right now, all right? I don't need you to tell me that. I'm amazed I got as much as 93, when I think about it. She's only done her best to humiliate me, hurt my friends, try to get Neville to leave me, and make his already enormous suffering worse. How much more has to happen until I'm justified in feeling this way?"

Ginny spoke in Harry's head. "Ginny says, 'He was making a factual statement, Hermione, not trying to judge you. He probably shouldn't have said that right then, but he didn't mean anything by it,'" said Harry, feeling odd in relaying a message that defended him.

Hermione sighed and held onto Neville more tightly. "I know, Ginny, I know Harry's not like that. It's just that, you're right, it just wasn't the best time to say that." Harry silently nodded, his heart going out to her. She touched Neville's face, on the verge of more tears. "Thank goodness I still have you."

"You always will," he assured her. They held each other again, and there was silence. Harry heard Ginny say in his head, "It's a quarter to noon, Harry. You should give Ron and Pansy the tour, if you're going to."

Harry relayed this to the room. “She’s right, we should get going. Ginny and I will come by later, if that’s okay.”

“I thought we might go back to the Burrow, actually,” said Neville. “I’ve been here for over a day now, it would be nice to have a change of scenery. You can meet us there.” Harry nodded, and he, Pansy, and Ron said goodbye and left.

After Kingsley confirmed that Ron could do the spells, Harry, Ron, and Pansy headed off for the Aurors’ fireplace to go to the Dursleys’. Harry had asked if Ron and Pansy needed to be authorized, but Kingsley had explained that the Aurors’ fireplaces were special; no fireplaces were unauthorized when accessed from there.

Harry came through the Dursleys’ fireplace first, followed by Ron, then Pansy. Dudley, watching TV in the living room, turned it off and got up. “Hi, Harry, Ron, Pansy. Ready for the tour?”

Harry remembered that Dudley had met them all at King’s Cross a few weeks ago, so there was no need for introductions. Ron looked around and said, “Oh, yeah, I was here once before. Didn’t see that much of the house, though.”

Dudley looked at Ron askance. “Yeah, I remember that time. Kind of hard to forget.”

Remembering, Ron said defensively, “That wasn’t me, that was my brothers. And they’ve done plenty worse to me, believe me.”

“Somehow, I believe it,” said Dudley. “Well, this is the living room, obviously.”

“This is the likeliest place for an attack,” said Harry, “though, really, there isn’t going to be one. We have Malfoy, no one else is going to bother.”

Puzzled, Pansy asked, “Why are we here, then?”

“To humor Mum,” replied Dudley. “She doesn’t care what problems you lot have, she just has to make sure the chances of anything happening to me are zero. Glad she isn’t like this about non-magical things, I’d have never been allowed out of the house.”

“Well, to be fair, you were almost killed,” said Harry. “I can sort of understand why she doesn’t believe us when we say it’s not going to happen again.”

Dudley shrugged. “Maybe. Anyway, I’ll show you the upstairs.” They went upstairs, first to Petunia and Vernon’s bedroom. “You don’t really need to know this one,” said Dudley, “nothing ever happens in here.” He snickered at his own joke. “And this is Harry’s bedroom, or was.”

“Aren’t they going to change it into something else?” asked Harry.

“They’ve talked about it, but haven’t done anything yet. Maybe they’re waiting, hoping you’ll come back.” Harry and Dudley laughed, while Ron and Pansy exchanged puzzled looks.

They walked into the next room. “This is my bedroom,” said Dudley.

“The second likeliest spot for an attack,” said Harry, “assuming anyone happens to know that it’s his bedroom, which they won’t. Say, it’s much cleaner than I remember.”

Dudley grunted. “Yeah, she made me spend all morning cleaning it up, because you guys were coming. Doesn’t like wizards, but she wouldn’t want them to think we’re a bunch of slobs. Can’t figure that out.”

“I thought she cleaned your room for you,” said Harry.

“Used to, but she started finding stuff I didn’t want her to find, so I told her I’d do it myself. Only problem with that is, I have to actually do it.”

“Life is rough,” said Harry, deadpan. Dudley nodded.

“What’s this?” asked Ron, “another one of those television things?”

“No, it’s a computer,” replied Dudley. “Oh, that reminds me, you guys are on the Internet! Did you know that?” He sat down and started calling up the page.

“Yeah, we heard about it recently,” said Harry. The page loaded onto the screen, showing pictures of each of the six, with Harry, Hermione, and Ron on top, followed by Ginny, Neville, and Pansy below.

“Hey, why am I third?” asked Ron in what Harry assumed was feigned annoyance. “I was his friend before Hermione, I should be second.”

“Maybe they wanted to keep it boy-girl-boy,” Dudley suggested.

“Cute how they make it so that the couples are above and below each other,” commented Pansy. “But I thought there were biographies. Where are they?”

“You click on the picture, and it takes you to that person’s page,” explained Dudley. He clicked on Ron’s picture, and they leaned forward to read the biography.

“Hey, they don’t mention Harry and I saving Hermione from the troll!” protested Ron. “These people need to do better research.”

“You could send them a suggested biography, Ron,” teased Pansy. “Or updates, at least. They’d probably want to know that you can use the energy-of-love spells now.”

“What, this happened recently?” asked Dudley.

“Yes, today, for the first time, actually,” replied Pansy.

“How does that work, anyway?” asked Dudley, obviously curious. “Is there anything special you have to do or learn to be able to do them?”

Obviously recalling what had happened with Harry and Ron the day before, Pansy and Harry burst out laughing. Now looking truly annoyed, Ron said, “You guys had better not say one word...”

“What?” asked Dudley.

Harry stopped laughing and said, “Well, Ron knows plenty of embarrassing things about me, so I’d better not say. But it’s different for each person. You read about what happened with me, that should give you some idea.”

Dudley smirked. “Yeah, it looked pretty embarrassing for you. I couldn’t believe you talked about stuff like that.”

Harry gave Dudley a look similar to one he’d given him earlier. “Yes, Dudley, but once again I call your attention to the fact—”

“That it saved my life, and so I should shut up and stop making jokes about it, right?” finished Dudley, looking resigned. “It just begs to be made fun of, though. Didn’t a lot of people at your school make fun of it, when you found it?”

Harry looked at Ron and Pansy. “You two would know better than me. People really didn’t joke about it to me.”

“The fact is, Dudley,” explained Ron, “that people were too busy being awestruck to make fun of it that much. This was a major, huge discovery. This Internet thing doesn’t talk about that?”

“It does, a bit. There’s not much information about it, though.”

Harry smiled. “That’s because there’s not much information about it, period. I’m the one who discovered it, I have to find out the information.” He paused, then glanced at Ron and Pansy. “With a little help from my friends.”

Dudley chuckled. “The Beatles.”

Startled, Pansy looked around. “Beetles? Where?”

“No, Pansy, he didn’t see any beetles,” Harry assured her. “It’s a Muggle musical group that he meant. The last words I said happen to be a famous song title.” To Dudley, he explained, “We’re having a little problem with one particular beetle right now, one that won’t leave us alone.”

“I could go get some bug spray,” offered Dudley.

Ron chuckled. “That sounds like a really good idea, actually. Why didn’t we think of that?”

“Unfortunately, Dudley, this is a beetle who is also a witch,” said Harry. “It’s a long story, but she’s been harassing us, following us around.” He went on to explain how being an Animagus worked.

“Cool!” enthused Dudley. “I’d be a wolf. Or maybe a cheetah, one of those ones that can run really fast.”

“No, problem is, you don’t get to choose what you are. You could end up a raccoon, or a penguin, or an aardvark.”

“Hmmm, maybe I wouldn’t bother then,” said Dudley. “Can you imagine working on it for three years, and then finding out you’re a rat?”

Harry and Ron exchanged a significant look. “Yes, that would be bad,” agreed Ron.

“Okay, well, let’s go downstairs,” suggested Harry. “We need to finish up and get Ginny over here.”

They walked down the stairs and headed for the living room, but Ron stopped in the hall under the stairs, and pointed to the cupboard under the stairs. “Harry, is this—”

“Yep,” Harry said. “Where I slept until I was eleven.”

“But there are two bedrooms upstairs!” exclaimed Pansy, aghast. “Why weren’t you in the other one?”

“That was Dudley’s second bedroom, for his extra stuff,” said Harry.

Ron and Pansy stared at Dudley, disbelievingly. “You had to mention that...” muttered Dudley, embarrassed.

Harry found that his current life circumstances were sufficiently good that he didn’t feel horribly scarred by his earlier hardships. Looking at Ron and Pansy, he said, “Look, I do want it to be clear that I don’t blame Dudley for that. My aunt and uncle didn’t want me, hated the idea that I was magical, and raised me as if I were a guest who had overstayed his welcome. One of the ways their unhappiness with me showed was that they went way out of their way to treat Dudley as the ‘real’ son, the one they were proud of, and me as someone who didn’t matter. My point is that they did that, not Dudley. Dudley was raised to think that that was the natural situation, to have two bedrooms, to have every argument between us decided in his favor. You don’t stop to think, ‘hey, this is unfair,’ if it’s unfair in your favor, when you’re a kid.”

“But why did your aunt and uncle treat you like that?” asked Pansy, obviously feeling sympathy for Harry. “It wasn’t like you were a bad person or anything.”

Harry paused to think for a few seconds before answering. “Obviously, I spent a lot of time wondering about that. When I was a kid, I thought there must be something wrong with me, otherwise why would they treat me that way? My best

guess is that they resented having to raise me when they didn't want to, and because I'm a wizard. If there's another reason, I sure don't know what it is."

Pansy turned to Dudley. "Do you know why, Dudley? Did they ever say anything to you about it?"

Though clearly uncomfortable with the topic, Dudley tried to answer anyway; Harry wondered if it was partly because he felt guilty for his part in how Harry had been treated. "They did, but nothing that would answer the question. They just always told me, for as long as I can remember, that he was a bad influence, that he was the sort of person you didn't associate with, that he was strange. Funny thing is, they never said why exactly, and I never thought to ask. I just accepted it. I do remember there were a few times when we were getting along, doing something together and having fun, and they would pull me aside, act as though I'd done something seriously wrong, and send me to my room. It was just easier to... give him a hard time. They had no problem with that. But beyond that, if there was another reason except for his being a wizard, I really couldn't say what it was."

Standing behind Harry, Pansy put her arms around him, her hands joining at his stomach. Embarrassed, he patted her hand. "Really, Pansy, it's okay. I don't think about it that much anymore. My life is really good now—well, except for the people trying to kill me, that's not so good—but I have you guys, I have Ginny, I still get to talk to Albus, there's lots of good stuff in my life. If what happened then was a trade for what I have now, it would be totally worth it. I'm really not complaining, and you shouldn't feel sorry for me."

She let go of him. "It's kind of hard not to, but if you say so." Looking at Dudley, she said, "Well, if he doesn't blame you, Dudley, then I don't either. Also, anyone who kicks Malfoy in the head a couple of times is all right with me."

Dudley grinned. "Seemed the least I could do, after he tried to kill me."

Harry saw Ron looking closely at the floor. "What is it?"

“Nothing, I just thought I saw something. Maybe I’m just being jumpy, after what Pansy said about beetles.”

Hearing Ron say that gave Harry an idea. He suddenly grabbed his robe at the waist and shook it vigorously. A beetle hit the floor and started skittering away.

“Dudley! Quick, find a jar!” shouted Harry. Dudley ran toward the kitchen, only to stop in amazement as the beetle started to change form, sprouting arms, legs, and a torso. In a few seconds, Rita Skeeter was standing in front of them. Dudley gaped in shock.

“No, thanks, I’ve spent more than enough time in a jar, thanks to the lovely and charming Miss Granger.” Giving Harry a contemptuous look, she added, “Took you long enough to think of doing that. Snape’s right, you really aren’t too bright.”

Harry tried to calm his mounting anger. “Get the hell out of—no, wait, I have an idea.” He walked up to her and reached for her head. She reflexively backed off. He gave her a hard stare and said, “I’ll do this with or without your cooperation.” She raised her eyebrows but said nothing. He reached over, found a strand of hair, and pulled sharply. He carefully placed the hair into a pocket in his robe. “Okay, now you can get the hell out of here.”

She regarded him with scorn and amusement. “Well, that wasn’t very energy-of-love-ish of you, now, was it? Why, it’s difficult to think that this is the same person who exchanged such tender words with Ron just yesterday.” Harry glanced over and saw Ron looking furious. “I’ll go, Harry, because it suits me to just now, but you, me, and Granger need to have a little chat. Now that I’m out in the open, things are different. I’ll meet you at the Burrow at one o’clock tomorrow, just the three of us. We’ll talk outside, wouldn’t want to be overheard.” She smiled at the irony of her own comment. Turning her back, she walked to the fireplace and threw in some Floo powder, shouted “Diagon Alley!” and was gone.

The four exchanged looks, no one saying anything for a moment. Finally Dudley asked, “Why did you take that hair from her?”

“To make a detector, like your pendant,” said Harry. “They can use this to make something that’ll let us know when she’s around. Boy, that was annoying.”

“That was the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen,” said Dudley fervently. “Wait till I tell Mum and Dad. Then again, maybe I’d better not.”

“It would really reinforce their idea that all wizards are freaks,” noted Harry. “Well, it’s been too long as it is, better get you guys back and get Ginny out here. Dudley, I’ll be back with Ginny in five minutes or so.”

They went into the fireplace, and five minutes later, Harry came out again, followed by Ginny. She and Dudley exchanged greetings, and she looked at his feet. Puzzled, he asked, “What is it?”

“I just wanted to look at your shoes,” she said. “Was hoping they were steel-toed or something.”

He smiled. “No, afraid not. Don’t usually kick people, but it just seemed the right thing to do in his case. Well, let’s do the tour.” They started walking through the house, in the same order as with Ron and Ginny. When they got to Dudley’s bedroom, Ginny looked at the computer, which was still displaying Ron’s picture and biography.

“Oh, this is that Internet thing! I want to see the one about me,” said Ginny. Dudley called up the page, and she started reading. “Seems fairly accurate. I’m surprised they found out about me being able to do the spells already. I didn’t think that was public knowledge, nothing’s been in the Prophet about it.”

Dudley was reading along with her. “Why does it say that you two are ‘expected to be married in the next few years?’ Are you engaged or something?”

“Not formally,” explained Harry, “but you already read about the Joining of Hands. Since that’s irreversible, everyone understands that it means we intend to be together for the rest of our lives. We’ll probably get married after Ginny graduates from Hogwarts.”

“Well, congratulations,” said Dudley. “So, are you guys... you know...”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Dudley...” he said in annoyance.

Ginny turned from looking at the computer screen, eyes sparkling. “Well, Dudley, he did discover the energy of love. It’d be kind of stupid of me to let that go to waste, wouldn’t it?”

Dudley and Ginny grinned as Harry moaned and looked away in embarrassment. “You’re really going to go to town with me right now, aren’t you,” asked Harry plaintively.

“It is very tempting,” agreed Ginny. To Dudley, she said, “He embarrasses so easily, I could have his face beet red in a few minutes. But I love him, so I’m not going to do that.” She leaned over and kissed him on the lips, evidently not caring about Dudley’s presence.

“Very thoughtful of you,” said Harry warily, not having decided whether she was joking or not. To Dudley, he warned, “Just wait till you get a girlfriend.”

“Oh, I have one,” replied Dudley. “She’d never do what Ginny just did, though. She likes to play hard to get. Likes me to chase her.”

“No, in our case, I chased Harry. Didn’t think I’d ever actually get him, but I did, somehow. I prefer to play easy to get, since it means I can be gotten more.”

Dudley grinned at Harry, who couldn’t help but grin back. “Like I said, my life is pretty good right now.”

“I see what you mean,” agreed Dudley. Ginny asked to look at Harry’s page, and Dudley called it up. “Wow, even a picture of the front and back of your Chocolate Frog card,” she commented. “They can’t make it so that your image leaves the card and comes back, though. Bet they could, if there were magical computers.”

“That should be a project for your father,” said Harry, picturing Arthur’s enthusiasm for doing something like that.

“Yeah, he’d like that,” agreed Ginny. “We should, I mean, you should get him a computer.”

“No, ‘we’ is right,” said Harry. “The money is yours, too, as far as I’m concerned. You should feel free to spend anything you want.”

“But we’re not married yet—”

“That’s really more a technicality,” he argued. “But it would make me happy. And you do like to make me happy, don’t you?”

She sighed. “You know just what to say, don’t you.”

Dudley looked confused. “You have money? How? How much?”

“My parents left it to me, and it’s forty-odd thousand Galleons. In Muggle terms, about two hundred thirty thousand pounds.”

Dudley gaped. “Wow... why didn’t you ever spend any of it? Buy yourself stuff?”

“Partly because I didn’t know the exact amount at first, and thought I’d better save it, and partly because I didn’t want your parents knowing. They might have decided that as my legal guardians, they were entitled to it.”

“Dumbledore would have never let them do that,” said Ginny. “And can you imagine them walking up to a Gringotts goblin and asking to get into your vault?”

“Good point, I don’t think it would be worth it to them,” agreed Harry. “Still, it would have been one more thing for them to harass me about, which I didn’t need.”

“So, you’re going to get her father a computer?” asked Dudley, clearly hoping the conversation wouldn’t take the same turn into Harry’s childhood that the last one had. “You’d need to get him an Internet connection, too, and it’s not trivial to get set up. You have to know what you’re doing.”

Ginny smiled at Harry. “Sounds like a job for Hermione.”

He nodded. “Maybe I’ll talk to her about it after the Apparation crisis is over. I’m sure she’ll want to spend the summer boning up on Transfigurations, though. Well, we’ve seen the whole place, Ginny, do you think you can Apparate here fast enough to save Dudley’s life?”

“I think so,” she responded casually. “And Dudley, if I do, and it’s Malfoy, you can pay me back by giving him a few more kicks in the head.”

Dudley laughed. "I would do that anyway, just for myself. But for you... I'll think of you the next time I go shopping for shoes."

"Good," she said. They headed towards the fireplace. As Harry prepared to throw the Floo powder into the fireplace, Dudley said, "Oh, Harry, forgot to mention it before, but... thanks for saving my life."

Harry smiled. "Any time."

* * * * *

Back at the Burrow, Harry and Ginny met Hermione and Neville. Harry told them about what had happened with Skeeter. Hermione moaned, "Oh, I don't think I can take meeting with her. Not right now. It's not going to be anything good, that's for sure." Harry found it hard to disagree.

"I was going to go back to the Aurors before Ginny and I went to sleep," he said. "Maybe I can get them to imbue something using that hair so we can know if she's around. I'd really rather not have her following me around. By the way, I wondered, why didn't she show up on those maps you made of Hogwarts last year?"

Hermione shook her head, angry with herself. "That was my fault, an oversight. Animagi don't show up on maps like that unless you do a special charm on them. I forgot to do it, and Remus didn't specifically mention it to me when we talked about it. I'm sure he remembered to do it on his map because the Marauders were all Animagi. There was nothing like that to make me think of it, and I didn't.

"But as for the imbuing, Harry, you don't need to go to the Aurors. I can do that, it's the same charm I used when I charmed the maps to make them go off if Crabbe or Goyle got near you. Just give me the hair and the item you want imbued, and it'll just take a minute. And I won't forget to do the charm that detects Animagi, so it won't matter whether she's a beetle or herself."

“Great, thanks,” he said, happy for the peace of mind of knowing that he would no longer be monitored without his knowledge.

“Harry,” said Ginny, “You did bring the Pensieve back. I want to see the Malfoy thing, before we forget.”

Before Harry could answer, Hermione chimed in, “Yes, I wouldn’t mind seeing it again myself.” Neville nodded his agreement.

Harry sighed. “Okay, it’s in my room, let’s go.” They went to the boys’ bedroom and watched the memory. When they came out of the Pensieve, Ginny smiled at Harry.

“Harry, I have to say, that was really...” Pretending to struggle for words, she ran a hand through Harry’s hair and another across his chest in a comically exaggerated, suggestive way. “Neville, Hermione, would you leave us alone for a while?”

The other three laughed heartily as Harry turned pink. “I think you heard me mention that I wasn’t totally proud of it,” said Harry in a mildly reproving way.

“Okay, Harry, now I’m going to be serious,” said Ginny. “I understand why you feel that way. But think about the fact that I was kidnapped and tortured by Malfoy, and he tried to kill me. He did worse to Pansy. For those of us who suffered because of him, there’s something comforting in knowing that you didn’t go easy on him when you had the chance. It was like you stood up for us; we know it was mostly because of us, because you care about us, that you were like that. You weren’t cruel, you weren’t inhuman, you just enjoyed catching him and making him pay, even if only a little bit, for what he’d done. I thoroughly enjoyed that, and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that, for knowing that you’ll be tough with people who hurt your friends.” She paused. “Also, I really am a little excited.”

This time, Harry smiled along with Neville and Hermione. “All right, I understand, I won’t argue with you. And as for the other thing, well, we’ll be back at my quarters soon. At least we won’t have to worry about unwanted visitors, thanks to Hermione.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows. “Do you think she’s...”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” he said, trying not to think about it. “She was clearly with Ron and I for our session yesterday, all she had to do was stay in my robes for a little while longer.”

Hermione’s face reflected her disgust. “That’s sick. Of course, it’s no more sick than the other stuff she’s done, but still... well, give me that hair, I’ll get to work on imbuing... what should I imbue?”

Ginny took off a ring and handed it to Hermione. Harry shrugged. “Don’t suppose you have any more of those fake Galleons? Except for the pendant, there’s nothing I carry around with me all the time.”

“A Galleon it is,” she agreed. “Yes, I have a few in my trunk.” She got up and headed to her room.

“How are you doing, Neville?” asked Ginny.

Neville shrugged. “Not so bad. Much better than yesterday would be a good way to put it.”

Ginny looked at him sadly. “I haven’t really had a chance a chance to talk to you since it happened, and I just wanted to say...” She trailed off, then walked to him and hugged him, holding him tightly.

“Thank you for saying that, Ginny,” said Neville, as he returned the hug. “I appreciate it. I suppose it’ll take some time to get used to it, but what happened today was a big help. Being able to see her talk to me like that... I wish every person who lost someone got to do that.” He let go of Ginny.

“Would’ve saved me a lot of grief if I’d gotten to do that with Sirius,” agreed Harry. “Especially since I felt I was largely responsible for his death. He probably would have told me I wasn’t, and that I shouldn’t think about it.”

“Me too, Harry, of course. You saw what Gran said about that.”

“Yes, Neville, but I didn’t understand what she was referring to. I didn’t want to ask you, because I felt like it was just my place to relay the message.”

Neville took a deep breath before speaking. “It was one of the things that Hermione and I were fighting about in the weeks before Gran was killed, in fact, even before we left Hogwarts. She thought I should come live at the Burrow too, and that security precautions should be taken at my place. I thought she was just trying to get me to come to the Burrow because she wanted to be around me, and I was flattered, but I knew how Gran would feel about it, and I said no without even asking her. Hermione was persistent, so finally I talked to Gran about the idea of our safety, and she refused to do anything differently. Ironically, today Hermione was apologizing for all the things she was wrong about, but she was right about this one. I felt like, if I had listened to her, maybe this wouldn’t have happened.”

Harry shook his head. “You know how your grandmother was, Neville. It wouldn’t have mattered what you had said. She wouldn’t have changed her mind.”

“I know, really. It’s just hard not to think about things like that.”

“Boy, I can really understand that,” said Harry, feeling that it was an understatement.

“Where are you going to live now, Neville?” asked Ginny. “I mean, somehow living alone in that house doesn’t seem like such a good idea.”

“Well, I probably wouldn’t be in that much actual danger,” said Neville. “I mean, I’m still not a high-priority target, and—”

“After what you called Voldemort?” asked Harry incredulously. “I think you made the high-priority target list, Neville. He takes that kind of thing pretty seriously. I’m sure he’s really angry that you said that to him and lived.”

“Hmmm, hadn’t thought of it that way. You may be right. Anyway, Gran’s house might be safe enough, since I have the adrenaline detector in the pendants, but I suppose they could get me while I was asleep or something. So, yes, I wasn’t going to stay there. I was going to stay with the Aurors for a few days, then come here. Cassandra wants me to stay so she can keep an eye on me, she wants to help me get better. But, yes, I will be here soon.”

“We’ll be happy to have you, Neville,” said Harry.

Neville nodded. "I knew that already, of course. But thanks."

Hermione walked into the room and, with great satisfaction, handed the ring to Ginny and the Galleon to Harry. "There you go, one guaranteed beetle-free afternoon of sleep. How did you get the hair from her, anyway? I wouldn't think she'd just give it to you."

"I kind of threatened her," admitted Harry. "I walked up to her to take it, and when she backed away, I said, 'I'll do this with or without your cooperation.' She didn't protest, and I took it."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, Harry. Like Ginny said, you're sticking up for your friends."

Giving Harry a significant look, Ginny said, "Harry, let's get back to Hogwarts. *Now.*" Fawkes burst into view as Hermione and Neville laughed, and Harry and Ginny grabbed his tail and were gone.

Harry walked into Snape's office later that evening at a few minutes after ten. Harry had not been surprised that Snape had called, as Snape had warned that he might, but it was the third straight night. Maybe he abstained too long when the Apparation crisis started, Harry had thought.

"Good evening, Professor," said Harry. "How's the schedule coming along?"

"Not so well," Snape replied. "I can tell you that you will have a particularly busy year, as you must teach the N.E.W.T. classes as well. I have tried to keep your schedule as similar to last year as possible, but some changes must of course be made. I was considering the possibility of consolidating your seventh year class, having all students in it rather than two separate classes, as is normal."

Harry shrugged. "Whatever you think is best. What made you think of doing that?"

"Mostly, last year's decimation of the sixth year Slytherin boys' ranks, which meant that the Slytherin/Ravenclaw class was reduced to nine students by the end

of last year. Combining them would mean one class of twenty-four members, which is manageable, and would give you one less class in your already busy schedule.”

“That sounds good, thanks,” said Harry agreeably.

“There is one development of which you should be aware,” Snape went on. “I received an owl today from Mr. Zabini, who states that he wishes to be included in the N.E.W.T. Defense Against the Dark Arts class.”

Harry nodded. “And...?”

Snape looked mildly annoyed, as if Harry should have anticipated the rest. “It is a highly irregular request, as he did not take the class in sixth year. Normally one cannot take the seventh year class if one does not take the sixth year class. I would have immediately refused the request, but such decisions are up to the discretion of the professor teaching the class, that is, you. I anticipated that you would approve the request.”

“And you were right,” confirmed Harry.

“I do not particularly care, but I would advise you to reconsider such a cavalier attitude,” said Snape, in a tone which Harry felt conveyed Snape’s conviction that Harry was acting stupidly. “Not only are there excellent reasons for disallowing such a request in general, but particularly in Mr. Zabini’s case. His skills in this subject are very poor, to put it mildly. Even before Mr. Longbottom’s improvement, Mr. Zabini made Mr. Longbottom look like an Auror by comparison.”

“Somehow I think he’ll do better this year,” argued Harry. “Remember, his dormitory-mates were Malfoy, Goyle, Crabbe, and Nott. From what I heard, they were always really abusive to him, treated him terribly, because he was shy and didn’t stand up for himself very well.”

“He was weak, is what you mean to say,” retorted Snape.

Harry found he didn’t like Snape’s attitude, and reminded himself that he was there to help Snape. He tried to focus on love. “You make it sound like what

happened to him was his fault. I don't like to think of how it would have been if it had been me in there instead of him."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You would have fought. You might have lost every fight, but you still would have fought." To Harry's surprised look, Snape continued, "I was told of your detentions with Dolores Umbridge, Professor. Of course you would have fought. You fought me for five years; you never allowed yourself to be cowed, as did Mr. Longbottom. Some people fight; some people do not."

Harry smiled a little. "Neville fights now."

Snape nodded in what appeared to be reluctant respect for Neville. "Yes, he does. I assume you are referring to the epithet he used. I imagine you all understand that he is now a high-priority target of the Dark Lord."

"Yes, we were talking about that earlier. Did you hear about what happened today?"

"No, I have not talked to the headmistress today, as she has been busy. I assumed I would learn of today's events in short order." Harry gestured to Snape to go ahead, and Snape did. He started with Harry returning to the Burrow yesterday, and his conversation with Arthur about the Memory Charm he had placed on Molly. He then saw the first Death Eater capture; Harry was impressed by Snape's ability to leap seamlessly from one significant memory to another, skipping what was unimportant.

Snape came to the Malfoy capture, and Harry saw the images in his mind as Snape accessed them. When Harry cast Legilimens on Malfoy, Snape gave a sudden start; Harry saw him look astonished and pale. "What is it?" asked Harry. Snape didn't answer, but backed up and viewed the scene again until Malfoy was taken away. Snape then viewed it a third time, focusing very closely on the images Harry had seen in Malfoy's mind. Snape then put down his wand, sat back in his chair, and seemed to be focusing on something. "Professor?" asked Harry, wondering what the problem was.

After a minute, Snape answered. “I am making a serious attempt, Professor, to restrain the anger and frustration I feel at your having done something so... breathtakingly foolish.”

Harry blinked in surprise. “Do you mean doing Legilimens on him?”

Evenly, Snape replied, “Yes, Professor, that is what I mean. At least you have discerned that much. Perhaps, as an exercise, you may want to try to work out why what you did was so terrible an idea.”

Harry was starting to become annoyed at Snape’s criticism, though relatively muted as it was, and embarrassed at the idea that there was something obvious he had overlooked. He tried to focus on love and think critically at the same time. After a minute he said, “The only thing I can think of is that if he had a wand, he could have struck back, and seen something in my mind, like us talking. But he didn’t have a wand.”

“Wandless magic is not unheard of, as you well know,” pointed out Snape. “That was one danger of what you did; though a low-probability danger, it was still not worth risking in the situation. But the larger danger, which I am astonished that you continue to overlook, was not what he would see, but what you would see. You could easily have seen him talking to me; I do talk to various Death Eaters at times, including him. If you had seen him talking to me, he would have known you had seen it, and therefore known that you knew me to be working for the Dark Lord. He would then expect you to convey this information to the headmistress, and I would be discharged and arrested; my being allowed to stay a Hogwarts professor after your seeing such a thing would have raised too much suspicion. I could still have ‘escaped’ and functioned as a spy against the Dark Lord, but not as a Hogwarts professor, which is where my true utility to him lies, or so he thinks.

“Naturally, in such a scenario, the damage would not be irretrievable. Mr. Malfoy would not immediately be able to communicate the information to the Dark Lord, but it must always be assumed that any Death Eater could escape at any time. The logical course would then have been the elimination of Mr. Malfoy, as he had

information which would damage us should it reach the Dark Lord, and that could not be risked.”

It took a minute for what Snape had said to register. “You mean... if I had seen him talking to you, you would have had him killed?”

“Strictly speaking, such a thing is not within my purview. I would have relayed the information to the headmistress and Mr. Shacklebolt, who would then have had to make the decision. I believe they would have made the correct choice; they are both realists, and even the small possibility of the Dark Lord getting such information is unacceptable. As events occurred, you saw nothing that could incriminate me, and so the headmistress and Mr. Shacklebolt were spared such a decision. However, what concerned me was not so much the question of whether Mr. Malfoy’s death would have to be arranged, but rather the stark realization that my life and my utility to the Order are in the hands of one capable of such a stunning misjudgment.”

Harry now felt very embarrassed. Snape was obviously right; he should have thought about the consequences of doing Legilimens on a Death Eater. He thought of apologizing, but immediately realized that an apology would mean nothing to Snape. He kept his expression even, saying nothing.

Snape continued speaking. “I can hear the words of the headmaster in my mind. ‘He is only seventeen, Severus. He is doing the best he can.’ That may be true, but you are sitting, as they say, at the adults’ table now. Lapses of judgment can cost lives, and of those more important than Mr. Malfoy. Perhaps I should attempt to tutor you in elements of tactical decision-making as it applies to such situations. I may be unable to offer opinions on love and morality, but I can give guidance on clear-headed thinking. It seems that such a thing could be useful to you.”

Harry understood that Snape did not intend to be insulting—in fact, was going out of his way to avoid it—but he still had to struggle to react to Snape’s suggestion dispassionately. “I’m not in a position to argue with you,” he said. “I’d be interested in whatever you had to say, as these situations come up.” He knew he

could learn from Snape, even if he'd rather not, and he wondered if he would one day lose the life of one of his friends to such a misjudgment. He did his best to swallow his pride.

That night was a slow one, from Harry's point of view; there were no Apparations, so it was beginning to appear that the information Harry had pulled from Malfoy was accurate. Near the end of the shift, Kingsley told Harry and Ginny that this might be their last one, and he would let them know for sure sometime that evening. In the meantime, he advised them to stick to their current sleep schedule for at least one more day. As they went off shift, Harry remembered that he and Hermione had to talk to Rita Skeeter in an hour. He wasn't looking forward to it, and he wondered how Hermione was dealing with the prospect of coming face to face with her tormentor.

At a few minutes to one, Harry and Hermione sat in conjured chairs in the Weasleys' front yard. Glancing at Hermione, Harry saw that she seemed to be trying hard to concentrate; he hoped it was on the energy of love. "How're you doing?"

"I'm reminding myself of the reasons not to actually kill her," she responded, looking straight ahead.

Harry nodded, as if it were the answer he expected. "Good idea."

In the distance, they saw the Knight Bus appear out of nowhere. It came toward the Burrow, and stopped. Rita Skeeter got out and walked up to them, wearing a cheery smile. "Hello. Lovely day, isn't it?"

Hermione was stonily silent, staring at Skeeter with undisguised loathing. Harry decided that he should speak as much as possible so Hermione wouldn't have to. "Okay, Skeeter, we're here. What did you want to talk about?"

Skeeter sat down in the chair Harry had already conjured. "Well, first, I'd really like to have a discussion with our dear Hermione about the moral issues involved in our little situation. It seems she thinks I'm evil, or something along those lines."

“‘Evil’ doesn’t come close to covering it,” spat Hermione in disgust. “You know what you did, you know what you tried to do. You’re not going to fool anybody by pretending it wasn’t evil.”

Skeeter shrugged lightly. “It wasn’t nice, I’ll grant you, though ‘evil’ seems like too strong a word. Nothing I said in those letters wasn’t the truth. Is it evil to tell people the truth? Maybe it is, when people don’t want to know the truth, when they’d rather close their eyes to who they really are. But that’s all I ever did, as a journalist. You were angry with me for revealing that Hagrid was a half-giant, but it was the truth.”

Harry decided to jump in before Hermione responded. “Everything you write has information taken out which would help to tell the truth if you put it in. You want people to think a certain thing, and you write to fit that. For example, Pansy didn’t tell Ron about the thing with Malfoy because she wanted to spare him pain, not because it wouldn’t ‘concern him.’ Hermione and Ginny were concerned about Pansy and Ron’s relationship, not thinking they ‘couldn’t make it work.’ It’s all—”

“‘Twisted and distorted,’ yes, I’ve heard you say that,” agreed Skeeter pleasantly. “But it could be true that Pansy didn’t think it would concern Ron. How would I know? It’s a reasonable extrapolation. And if Ron and Pansy broke up over him bringing up her past, couldn’t you accurately say that they ‘couldn’t make it work,’ and that was what Ginny and Hermione were talking about? I really reject your premise that you can’t present a certain point of view when writing an article and still have it be true.”

“Hugo doesn’t do that,” argued Harry.

Skeeter laughed derisively. “Ah, Brantell... yes, Harry, he does do that, he just does it in your favor. Like you said with your cousin, you don’t worry that things aren’t fair if they’re not fair in your favor. He omits information from his articles that would make you look bad if he put it in, because he likes you. It’s no different than what I do. So I don’t condemn him for it; anybody in the journalism

trade understands that any article is going to have a point of view. Intelligent readers,” Skeeter emphasized the word with a glance at Hermione, “understand that as well, and filter the article accordingly. Journalism would be extremely boring if there was no point of view.”

“So it’s all right to leave people with an impression that isn’t true?” pressed Harry.

“As I said, smart people will recognize the article’s point of view, and adjust for it when they read,” replied Skeeter. “And if they’re not smart enough to, well, too bad for them. I don’t write just for stupid people to be able to understand, and fortunately, the Prophet doesn’t make me.”

“Skeeter,” said Hermione, trying to stay in control of her emotions, “I really have better things to do than listen to your pathetic rationalizations for what you do, and every minute I spend with you is a minute I have to try very hard not to vomit. So could we please speed this up?”

“Why, of course, Hermione,” sneered Skeeter, in a tone that suggested that Hermione was a child who needed to be placated, “because you know there’s nothing I’d rather do than make you happy.” Her tone suddenly hardening, she continued, “Vomit all you want, for all I care. You’re no better than me, for sure. You created me, in fact. Ask Harry, he understands it. He had interesting conversations about it, about you, the other day, with Ginny, then with Snape. He was wrestling with the morality of what you did to me, which is clearly more than you did. If you had, you would probably have no problems with me right now.”

Hermione stared at Skeeter silently. Skeeter raised her eyebrows, as if Hermione had asked an interesting question. “And what was the result of these conversations? Why, I’m glad you asked. As Harry will tell you, Ginny and Snape both, in very different ways, reached the conclusion that you prevented me from writing for reasons of revenge, not because you wanted to protect yourself and your friends from my awful point of view. You could have, as Snape very intelligently pointed out, let me keep writing, just made sure I didn’t write anything

that you disapproved of. That would have been annoying, but livable; I would have just had to write to the point of view that you would want. It would have been an interesting challenge. But instead, I had to sit at home and twiddle my thumbs. Or, as Ginny put it, sit around with nothing to do but nurse a grudge. She's smart, Harry, smarter than you are."

Skeeter, becoming more emotionally intense, leaned forward and stared at Hermione. "Yes, Granger, this is revenge. I'm not going to make any bones about that. But you shouldn't be surprised about any of this, and the only reason you are points to the fact that you think you know best, but you really don't. You're paying now for a mistake you made when you were fourteen, a mistake that cost me a lot. You were just a kid, a hurt and offended little girl with far more brains than common sense. You thought, 'oh, I know, I'll stop her from writing for awhile! She lies, she's a bad woman, so I'll be doing a good thing!' You had, you have, no idea how it feels to sit at home and stare at the walls, to be prevented from doing something you love and you're good at. The punishment you imposed on me was hugely out of proportion to what I had done. Should it really surprise you that my thoughts turned to the question of getting back at you, at teaching you a lesson? Did you not think about the fact that people would wonder why I stopped writing, and would ask me questions about it that I couldn't really answer? How that made me look to my friends, my family? But no, you were right. You're always right.

"I'm not trying to get you to feel sorry for me, Granger. I really don't care. But I would like you to at least know what you did, because I don't think you really did. Harry was right when talking to Ginny—you're getting back what you put out, only more. But I'm not even sure that it's that much more. For your hurt feelings, you wrecked my life. You're still going to think I'm the moral equivalent of a Death Eater, but you might want to take a look in the mirror. You're responsible for this, you caused this. Maybe next time you won't wreck people's lives without a thought or a care."

Hermione still looked stony; Harry thought he saw flashes of uncertainty in her eyes once or twice, but wasn't sure. As for Skeeter, he still thought that what she had done was cold-hearted and cruel, but he had to admit that he hadn't thought through what Hermione's actions had done to Skeeter.

Hermione finally spoke. "You were an unregistered Animagus," she said coldly. "You used your ability to do things you knew would hurt people. You wouldn't have found out about Hagrid being half-giant if you weren't an Animagus. People have reasonable expectations of privacy. If they see no people around, they think they're alone. If I made a mistake, it was in not simply turning you in. Then you would have never written again, and would you blame me for wrecking your life? Or yourself for doing something against the law?"

Skeeter scoffed. "Oh, please. You don't think parents had a right to know that Hagrid is half-giant? They thought they did, when they found out. If what I did hurt people, well, the truth hurts, as you've been finding out lately. And I laugh at your scolding of me for breaking the law. There are laws against blackmail, which you may be finding out soon. You're right, you should have just exposed me. I wondered why you didn't; I assumed it was that you wanted me in your back pocket for some reason, like to get me to do that stupid article about him a year and a half ago. For no pay, adding insult to injury. Which reminds me, I also haven't been getting paid for a while, another thing you neglected to consider in your little punishment scheme. Or if you did consider it, you didn't care.

"Well, enough about the past. You're probably too angry to feel anything except self-righteous, too stubborn to admit that you were anything but totally correct in what you did. So let's move on to the future. You can be my friend, or my enemy. If you choose to be my enemy, believe me, there's plenty I can do to make your lives miserable. Those letters were just a hint of it, to let you understand what you could be letting yourselves in for.

"If you choose to be my friend, there are some considerations I will expect in return. Those considerations don't involve you much, Granger, because there's

little you could do that would be of benefit to me. But you,” she said, smiling and turning to Harry, “there’s a lot you could do for me. First of all, interviews with you anytime I wanted, on whatever topic. I would replace Brantell as your personal journalist; I’d even be willing to write from your ‘point of view,’ like he does. You wouldn’t have to worry about looking bad. You’re the future star of the wizarding world, Harry. You’ll be better-known and more well-respected than even Dumbledore was. It would do me good to have that kind of access to you.

“Secondly, as you know, I may be up on charges for being an unregistered Animagus. I have friends, people who can help me game the system, but another never hurts. I would want and expect you to use your influence, which is now considerable, to intervene on my behalf. You have clout, even if you don’t like to use it. It’s possible that I could even escape any form of punishment altogether, end up with a slap on the wrist.

“Thirdly, I suffered quite a bit from my enforced layoff, as I’ve mentioned, partly due to a lack of income. I would like to be compensated for that, in the sum of twenty thousand Galleons. I would ask it of her, but she doesn’t have it, and she can’t exactly ask it of her parents and tell them it’s for hair care products, though she could really use them. So I ask it from you; you do have it, you’re not using it, and you are culpable in that you knew what she was doing to me and said nothing. I know that it’s more than I would have earned as salary during that time, but part of it is... punitive, a term that our innocent little Hermione should understand very well, as what she did to me was highly punitive. There are other small details concerning what it would take to be my friend, but those are the important ones.”

Harry mentally recoiled; each of the demands was hard to contemplate acceding to. He was disgusted by the idea of giving access to Skeeter, even if it was to be favorable, and helping her avoid charges was exactly the kind of thing he did not want to use his influence for. The request for twenty thousand Galleons was also anathema, though more on principle than because of the financial loss.

Hermione was obviously having similar thoughts. Looking appalled, she said, “Harry, under no circumstances are you even going to consider what she is suggesting. There is no way you are going to agree to this.”

Skeeter smiled. “I expected that reaction from you, of course. Harry here looks like he’s considering it, or at least, not rejecting it. But before we ask him for an opinion, it’s probably good to know the consequences of being my enemy.

“First, Harry, I have had a lot of free time over the past two years, and as you’ve guessed, I’ve spent a lot of it with you. Her, too, and your friends, but especially you. Mostly I’ve been hanging onto the inside of your robes, as I was today when it finally occurred to you to shake them out. This was not exactly comfortable at times, especially that day when Ginny ‘jumped in the deep end.’ When you did that, with your robe...” Skeeter wore a look of disgust, and rolled her eyes, “that was something I really, really didn’t want to see, especially not from that angle.”

Harry wondered if she was trying to deliberately anger him, or to let him know details of what she knew that could be used later to embarrass him. Hermione’s face reflected her confusion as Harry tried to control his growing feelings of rage. Fury in his eyes, he stared at Skeeter. “You weren’t invited.”

She shrugged, as if not noticing his reaction. “True, but I thought you should know that what I’ve done hasn’t been easy at times for me. Anyway, back to the subject, I know how much you dislike being in the public eye, even though it is mostly in a favorable way. You would really rather nothing was written about you at all. Well, after my being around you all this time, it shouldn’t surprise you to learn that I have quite a bit of information about you; voluminous, you could say. More than enough to write a book. I’m three-quarters done, in fact. I haven’t decided on a title yet... I’m thinking about, ‘The Secret Life of Harry Potter,’ and there is quite a bit that’s secret about it. It would be a huge bestseller, and I could still do it, even if I end up spending time in prison for being an Animagus.” Harry winced inside; the

thought of such a book being written, especially in the way she would no doubt write it, was sickening.

“I see you’re not thrilled at the idea,” she continued, clearly enjoying herself. I didn’t think you would be. Now, *Consequence of Being My Enemy No. 2*: You could expect me to continue to make your lives highly unpleasant, and not even considering what I might find out in the future, there’s plenty that I know now that you would not want known. For example, Granger, naturally your blackmailing of me would be brought to the attention of the authorities. You think you did nothing illegal, but I think you’re wrong. That would definitely be put to the test. Also, your parents could find out not only that you’re involved in highly dangerous activities, and have been for years, behind their backs, but that you also lied about the reasons for staying at the Burrow, and approved of them being given Memory Charms when their rings were modified. By the time I was done with them, you’d be lucky if they ever wanted to see you again.”

Just then, Harry saw the front door of the house open, and Neville walk out towards where they were sitting. Harry was surprised; he assumed Hermione had told him that Skeeter wanted to talk to them alone. Neville walked over to Hermione’s chair and without a word, leaned down and gave her a kiss—a long and energetic kiss, far more so than Harry had ever seen Neville do in public before. He knew why, of course, as upon finishing, Neville gave Skeeter a disdainful glance before heading back into the house. For the first time since the meeting had started, Hermione smiled.

“Well, wasn’t that cute,” said Skeeter, dripping sarcasm. “And it reminds me, of course, of another of the things that could happen. So many things could come out that would be inconvenient, or worse... Neville’s little outburst against Lestranger, not to mention the Aurors’ covering it up... Your slip in the Department of Mysteries and your long and close relationship to the convicted murderer Sirius Black are definitely things that would come out in your biography, as well as the fact that you’ve become a Legilimens... it could be arranged for Molly to be shown a

Pensieve memory of your little conversation the day Percy died, not to mention being told about the Memory Charm... it could become publicly known that you talk to dead people in your sleep; people would find that highly interesting, not that it would do much for your credibility... and then, yes, there's that utterly fascinating, not to mention rather peculiar, relationship you have with Professor Snape. It's like he feeds on your memories... kind of bizarre, really. People would be so intrigued to know about it!"

"You couldn't write about that!" Harry almost shouted. Keeping his voice down, he continued, "Embarrassing us is one thing, but that's top secret information. Writing that would cost us Professor Snape as a spy, which I don't think the Prophet is going to let you do, and the Ministry won't let the Prophet do."

"It wouldn't necessarily cost you Professor Snape's services," Skeeter argued. "He could tell Voldemort that he concocted some story to convince you that it was necessary, as a way of gaining access to your memories. Quite ingenious, really."

"Then Voldemort would want to know why he hadn't been getting information from that all along," responded Harry. "Besides, it's too risky. You can't know the consequences."

"But this is only if you decide to be my enemy, Harry," she said sweetly. "You could be my friend, and then we would never have to worry about all this unpleasantness. There are other things, such as the fact that Dumbledore can incapacitate Voldemort, or at least that you think he can—you might be unbalanced in thinking it, of course—and that stuff Hermione rubbed on him, that if you're my friend, you never have to worry about being revealed."

"You wouldn't," said Hermione. "You'd be convicted of treason. That's all highly classified."

Skeeter shrugged. "You may be right. Who knows? What's important is, I'd rather keep you guessing about what I would do or wouldn't do. And there's plenty more that I haven't mentioned, plus whatever I can do or find out in the future. You

definitely don't want me as an enemy. So, think it over. You have five days; I want to know by next Monday."

She stood and started walking away. After a few steps, she turned and smiled. "Oh, and Harry... I know it was yesterday, but... happy birthday."

CHAPTER 5

HARRY POTTER'S TRAGIC CHILDHOOD

Twenty minutes later, Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny sat in the girls' bedroom, two each on two beds, facing each other. Hermione had just finished relaying the conversation to Neville and Ginny, who, like Harry and Hermione, were appalled.

Hermione concluded by saying, "I wish we could have told Ron and Pansy, too, on an open pendant channel, but they're doing their shifts, so we'll have to tell them about it later."

Pained, she looked at each of the others' faces before continuing. "Also, before we talk about what we're going to do, I want to apologize to all of you, especially Harry, for getting us into this mess." Turning to him, she continued, "You're the one who's going to suffer most for what I did, whichever way we choose. I'm very, very sorry... I never would have done this if I'd known what could happen."

Harry recognized that it was true that he was in a dire position because of what Hermione had done, but he felt strongly enough about Hermione that he wasn't about to kick her when she was down. "We all do things we wish later we hadn't done," he said. "Why should you be any different?"

She chuckled ruefully. "I thought I was. Well, anyway... I want to know what everyone thinks, but I want to know what you think first, Harry, because this affects you most of all."

He didn't have to think long. "To me, the question isn't whether we fight her, but how we fight her. First of all, giving in to this kind of thing is just really bad on principle. If I gave in, I would feel I was living someone else's life, not my

own. Secondly, once we gave in, we'd be hers to control. She'd know she could get us to do anything. I don't think I can live my life like that. It just isn't that hard a decision."

"Neville?" she asked. "She did make that threat about you. If you were convicted—"

"It's not going to happen," replied Neville confidently. "She has no proof. Even if she admits she saw it as a beetle and heard us talk about it, that's not proof. Also, the Aurors would back me up, to them it would be as if I were an Auror. We should talk to Kingsley before this happens, but I'd rather take my chances, for the same reasons as Harry said. I don't want to be under someone's thumb, and whatever happens to Harry happens to all six of us. We're in it together."

"Ginny?"

Harry had no doubt about Ginny's response, and he was right. "Do you really need to ask? Of course, we fight."

Hermione looked at them proudly. "I have a feeling Ron and Pansy will say the same thing—but when we ask them, we get their opinion before telling them ours—so now we have to work out how we do it, what we do, what our options are in terms of fighting her."

"I was thinking about this while we were still out there talking, actually," said Harry. "I was thinking that one thing we might want to do, or might have to do, is reach out, see what people we know can do to help us. There are some things that she's threatened, like writing a book about me, that we can't do anything about. But there are some things that we could do, or try to prevent from being done. Like talk to Kingsley about her threat to Neville; if they know about it beforehand, they might be better able to defend against it. Also, I could talk to Archibald and Hugo; Hugo could tell me the situation at the Prophet, whether there was any chance of getting them to refuse to print anything she writes. He wouldn't be able to do anything himself, but he could tell me who could. Archibald could help work out the question of how her punishment will work, and whether the Ministry could

make the Prophet not print anything she writes, or even make the terms of her punishment that she can't write for any papers. We need to go on the offensive, we need to find out what the possibilities are."

"We also need to find out how we can protect Hermione from the legal consequences of what she did," added Neville. "If there are any."

Hermione shrugged. "At this point, I feel like saying I deserve whatever I get, but I know you guys feel differently, and I appreciate that. I understand the point, Harry, but in a way I'd rather take a couple of days before we start talking to people about this. Maybe there's something we're overlooking, something we can do to stop this before it starts. I'd like to at least think about it before we start telling people."

"What could we do?" asked Ginny. "Find something worse to blackmail her with?"

Surprised, Hermione glanced at Ginny to see whether she was joking. "No, even if that was an option, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't do it, in case it backfired like my other one has. No, I think I've learned my lesson. I feel like I'm in one of those Muggle children's dramas, you know the ones, Harry, that try to teach children morals. 'And what did we learn this time? Well, we learned not to do things we know are immoral, because they always come back to haunt us.'" Hermione wasn't usually this cynical, but Harry could easily understand her attitude.

"Anyway," continued Hermione, getting back to Ginny's comment, "no, it's not that I have anything specific in mind, but just that it might be good to have some time to mull it over, think more carefully about what to do. Also, we have to be careful about what we do that quickly. I mean, suppose Harry contacted Hugo, and Hugo started making inquiries. Suppose by bad luck one of those got back to Skeeter. As it is, she's not going to do anything for five days, waiting for our answer, but in that case she would know our answer, and start doing things right away."

“We probably shouldn’t wait too long, though,” suggested Ginny. “We do want to get outside advice before she starts doing whatever it is she’s going to do. Maybe we should start telling people in two days, on Friday.”

“That’s all right with me,” agreed Hermione, checking to see if it was with the others as well. “But one thing, I have to be the one who does the telling. Neville, you and I will tell Kingsley, and Harry, I’ll be with you to tell Dentus and Hugo. And I’ll tell McGonagall myself.”

“Do you really have to tell McGonagall?” asked Neville, obviously thinking that would be highly unpleasant for Hermione.

“She’s going to find out about it anyway, Neville. I’d really rather she heard it from me than someone else. I respect her too much for that.” Harry could understand that, knowing he’d have felt the same way about Dumbledore, if it had been him. “Maybe we’ll think of other things we can do, that might help us. Maybe she can help us in some way we don’t know about. Obviously we don’t want to tell too many people, since it could get around to people we don’t want it to. But we should tell people we can trust.”

“We have to tell my parents too,” pointed out Ginny.

Hermione nodded reluctantly. “They know part of it already, of course, but... yes, I’m not looking forward to that, either.”

“Is there any chance that she could get in trouble for trying to blackmail us?” wondered Neville.

“It’s the same problem as with her trying to get me in trouble for what I did,” said Hermione. “There’s just no proof, nothing that would stand up at a trial. What she did is more obviously illegal, since she demanded money, but I doubt we could get her. That’s something that Dentus could tell us, probably.”

There was silence for a moment; it seemed that no one had anything more to say. Hermione spoke again. “Okay, we’ll talk to Ron and Pansy when they get off shift. Obviously without you and Ginny, Harry, if you have a shift tonight. If you don’t, it’ll be the six of us.

“By the way, Harry, Ginny... I assume you did have a conversation about roughly what she said.” They nodded. “You are right, Ginny. It was revenge. I didn’t even realize it at the time, I just thought it was justice. But she was right, when she said I was a hurt little girl with more brains than common sense. That’s what’s so... really frustrating about all this, a lot of what she’s said has been true. That, and the way I’ve treated Neville... it’s just hard to face up to stuff like that about yourself, never mind in the middle of a situation like this, and what Neville and I have already been through...”

It had been clear since the middle of her last sentence that tears were coming. Closest to her, Ginny put an arm around Hermione and let her cry on her shoulder. After Hermione finished, she thanked Ginny. “I bet I’m going to be doing a lot more of that before this is over,” she said as she wiped away tears. Recovering, she added, “I almost wish I were still doing the shifts with the Aurors, it would give me something else to think about besides this.”

“Well, if you really want something else to think about, there’s something Harry was thinking about doing, that we wanted to ask you about,” suggested Ginny.

Realizing what Ginny meant, Harry corrected her. “Something *we* were thinking about. I’m trying to get her used to the idea that my money is now our money.”

“That may take a little time,” she said, “you may have to be patient with me.”

“I am nothing if not patient,” he said. To the others’ smiles, he added, “Well, not really. But I’ll try. Anyway, we were thinking about buying some stuff, getting a computer and whatever else is necessary to use the Internet here. Arthur would like it, but it would be for anyone to use who wanted to.”

Hermione’s face lit up. “Oh, that’s a great idea, Harry! Arthur would just love it, and it would be convenient for me, too. What did you want to ask me about it?”

“Well, we got the idea from seeing it in Dudley’s room,” explained Harry. “He said that it’s not that simple, that to get it set up you have to really know what you’re doing. So as you know, whenever there’s something that requires a lot of research and will probably be boring and difficult, we think of you.”

Neville and Ginny laughed, and Hermione reluctantly smiled. To Ginny, in a clearly sarcastic tone, she said, “It’s when he says things like that, Ginny, that I can see why you can’t keep your hands off him.”

“Well, he doesn’t say things like that to me,” replied Ginny.

Still smiling, Hermione said, “I know you’re just trying to make me laugh, Harry. I appreciate it. Sure, I’ll look into it. My parents have it, of course, I’ll ask them about it too. I assume you’re hoping your part in this will be limited to providing the money?”

Mildly chagrined, he nodded anyway. “That would be ideal.”

“Hmmm... I may make you do more than that, but we’ll see. It’s very sweet of you, both of you. And Ginny, you really should think of it as your money too, he’s right. Neville and I don’t have that issue, just because neither of us has much money.”

“I was thinking,” said Harry to Ginny, “that you and I should go on a shopping trip, get you used to the idea of using the money.”

She smiled mischievously. “Better hope I don’t get too used to it. But yes, I suppose you could talk me into it.”

“Okay, I guess we’re done, and I know you two need to go to sleep soon,” said Hermione. “But there’s another thing I want to talk to you about, and I’m really sorry, Neville, but...”

“That’s okay, I understand,” said Neville, standing up. “I know you have to talk about this with them from time to time, you don’t have to apologize to me every time. It’s really all right.” He left the room and closed the door.

Keeping her voice down, Hermione said, “About this thing about not telling people for a few days, it occurred to me that Snape could easily find out, Harry. He could just look at what happened today.”

Harry shrugged. “If he sees it, he sees it. Not much that anyone can do about that. But I’ll know if he’s seen it, and if he does, I’ll ask him to keep it under his hat until we start telling other people.”

“Do you think he would?” wondered Hermione.

“I’m not sure, but I think so. I think he understands the idea that what he gets from my memories isn’t something he’s going to talk about with other people, or use the information without my permission. I think he would understand why it has to be that way. He’s been very cooperative about the whole thing so far, like the timing and stuff like that.”

“How’s it going, anyway?” she asked.

“Fine,” said Harry. “He didn’t do it for almost a week, when the Apparation thing started, but now he’s done it three days in a row. I guess he went too long without it, but he did say that that kind of thing would happen. Nothing really significant has happened, except that yesterday he practically had a fit when he found out I did Legilimency on Malfoy.” Harry explained why Snape had reacted as he had.

Hermione frowned. “He’s right, I should have thought of that too. I guess I was just enjoying what you did to Malfoy so much, I didn’t think of the possible drawbacks. I can see why he was so upset.”

“He was really trying to control himself; he knows that screaming at me isn’t going to do any good, and will only make it that much harder for me to help him. It’s funny, though... when he uses phrases like ‘breathtakingly foolish’ or ‘stunning misjudgment’ now, it actually bothers me more than it ever did when he insulted me before, because I know now he’s not trying to be insulting, but trying to choose a phrase he thinks is accurate. And like you felt with Skeeter at times, the truth hurts.

I did Legilimency on Malfoy partly because I wanted information, but mainly to hurt and humiliate him, because it would, and I could.

“Anyway, other than that, it’s going all right with him. The hardest part is... you remember that Albus said that I would have to ‘come from a place of love’ all the time when I helped Snape. Especially since he’s on his best behavior, that hasn’t been as hard as I thought it might be. But it’s really hard when I have other emotional reactions at the same time. Like, I felt really stupid and embarrassed at not thinking of the thing with Malfoy, and it’s hard to feel that way and be calm and loving at the same time. That’s where this is a lot harder for me than it was for Albus.” He paused, thinking about whether there was anything else that needed to be discussed. “Well, we should get going, we still need our sleep in case we do a shift tonight.”

They stood up. Hermione looked as though she were trying to keep her expression casual, but she was clearly still anguished at what the consequences of her actions might be to Harry. “Harry, I—”

He cut her off with a gesture, then stepped forward to hug her. “I’m so sorry,” she said in a small voice as he held her.

“It’s all right,” he said, hoping it would be true. “Whatever happens, we’ll deal with it. Don’t blame yourself.”

She had started to cry a little, but she chuckled at his last words. “Not much chance of that. Of course I blame myself, it’s my fault this happened.” She hugged him more tightly. “But it’s nice of you to say that anyway.”

He shook his head. “She didn’t have to do what she did. She chose it. She’s far more responsible than you. Don’t forget that.” He let her go, and she smiled her thanks. Ginny hugged Hermione as well, and they took Fawkes back to Hogwarts.

Thirty minutes later, in the bed in his quarters, Harry finished his Occlumency exercises. Ginny was on her side, facing him; he rolled over away from her to try to sleep. He felt her move closer to him, a hand on his side. He rolled back towards her.

“You’re still up?” he asked, surprised.

“Just thinking.”

“About the Skeeter thing?”

She nodded. “About what could happen.” Concerned, she looked closely into his eyes. “Are you scared? About what could happen?”

He looked back, understanding that this was what a life partner was for, to talk about how he felt in ways that he wouldn’t to anyone else, that he preferred not to admit to himself. “Yes. I’d never say it to Hermione, of course, but... I’m terrified at the idea of the book. I’d rather walk through Diagon Alley stark naked than have her publish a book like that, knowing what she’d say... with her ‘point of view,’ with just enough truth to make the lies seem believable. I’m pretty scared of that.”

She gently touched his face. “I can see why, I would be too. It may be small comfort, but the people who know you and care about you wouldn’t believe it, wouldn’t even read the book.”

“I know. And you’re right, it is a comfort, but a small one.” He looked into her eyes and saw her love for him, her compassion, the sure knowledge that there was nothing she could do to help him that she wouldn’t do. He moved closer and wrapped his arms around her. “What is a comfort, a big comfort, is... we saw what she tried to do to Neville and Hermione, and how close it came to working. I know that there’s nothing she can do to get us anywhere near that point. I know I’ll always have you. You, your love, are the biggest comfort I could have.”

She squeezed him hard. “I’m glad, I’m very glad. That’s all I really want.”

They lay silent in their embrace for a minute. He said, “You know, it’s a terrible thing to think, but I almost wish the Apparation crisis would continue a while longer.”

She moved her head from his shoulder so she could look at him. “No, you don’t. You just wish we could sleep in the same bed. But I know what you mean, I

do too. It's so nice." She sighed. "Well, it's something to look forward to when I graduate."

"Two years seems like a very long time right now."

"I know we should sleep, we have to sleep, there could be a shift. But part of me wants to just lie here awake for seven hours, enjoying this, because we may not get to do it again for a while."

"We'll be able to lie here," he corrected her. "Just not sleep."

"Guess so. Well, I'll roll over, then." She did, and Harry moved closer to her. He put his arms around her from behind, his body close to hers. She let out a small moan of contentment. "I love it when you do that."

"I do too," he said. "It's another big comfort."

"For me, too," she agreed. They stayed in the position until they fell asleep.

* * * * *

Nine and a half hours later, at a few minutes before midnight, Harry and Ginny walked into the standby area, looking for Kingsley. He walked in from the detection area, Ron and Pansy behind him. He asked them all to join him in a meeting room, and in a minute all five were sitting in one.

"Okay, it's been thirty-six hours since the last Apparation," said Kingsley. "We had excellent reason to believe that there would be no more, and events seem to be bearing that out. So, we're going to change how we deal with this, and part of the change is that you six won't be here all the time anymore. We will want you on call, in a sense, but we're going to consider that the period when we need to respond to each call with absolute maximum speed is over. We've won that battle.

"What we're going to do for the next... we're not sure how long, is that six people are going to be on ready status instead of ten, but the ones on standby will go too, just a few seconds later. We think that's an adequate safety precaution in case of an ambush. Another precaution is that after responding to a call, the senior

Auror on the scene needs to send an ‘all clear’ signal, or you could call it the ‘it’s not an ambush’ signal, within two seconds. If they don’t, it becomes a full alert, and all hands are called in, including you. We think that twelve Aurors can hold off however many of them there are for a few seconds, and we can arrive in force. Another aspect of this is that the ARA is being stiffened up; the penalty for a first offense is now two months in jail. After what just happened, we’re assuming every call is a Death Eater attack.

“Now, as for how you fit into this... you six, or, five, until Neville is ready for action again, will be on call but not on-site. Your pendants will notify you if there’s a call and the two-second ‘all clear’ isn’t sent. When that happens, you should immediately Apparate to the detection room. Now, unfortunately, you’re all at the Burrow, and can’t Disapparate from there. So you have to get here in whatever way is fastest. If you’re downstairs, head for the fireplace, and once you’re in ours, Apparate to the detection room. If you’re sleeping, Harry will call Fawkes, who will take the boys to the room, then go back for the girls. You get the idea. This way, we can use you without having to have you here all the time. If you’re all right with it, that is. It seems like a reasonable medium-term solution. We know that once you’re back at Hogwarts, only Harry can respond by Apparating, and we’ll deal with that later. So, are you all okay with this?”

As expected, they all were, but Harry felt he had to mention something. “For now, it’s only us four. I tested Hermione, and she’s at 93. It’s not confirmed that she can’t do the spells, but it seems like a reasonable guess. I wouldn’t want to test it.”

“How did that happen?” asked Kingsley, puzzled.

“She’s come under a pretty vicious emotional attack in the past few days, which you kind of know about already,” said Harry. “My guess is that if you have a lot of very negative emotions in the front of your mind, you can’t use the energy of love. We can’t know, of course, but I think it’s a good guess.”

Kingsley sighed. “You’re the one best equipped to make it, Harry. But this could be a problem. Does this mean we’re going to have to be checking everyone all the time? That could get messy. Could you drop below 100 just from having a bad fight with your spouse? We need to know how this works.”

“As you know, Kingsley, this is very new,” replied Harry. “I don’t know. My guess is that it takes something really bad to knock you below 100. I mean, Ron got a fairly bad, but temporary, emotional blow about ten hours before he got his first 100, so I think it takes a lot.”

Kingsley still looked uncomfortable. “If you could test Hermione every day or two, as she gets better, it would tell us a lot about how this works.”

“I’m not sure that would be a good idea. She was upset just that I asked to test her, and much more when she didn’t pass. This is all very... mental. Being tested often when they’re not at 100 might give people a stronger sense of being under pressure, and make it harder for them to get there. I mean, given what he’s been through, I’m not sure that Neville would be at 100 now, either, but I haven’t tested him because I don’t want him thinking about it. I only tested Hermione because I had to. I think they’ll both get back to 100 as they recover naturally from what’s happened.”

Kingsley now seemed positively annoyed. “I should have known that there would be teething problems with something this good. Could you four humor me and let me check you out?” He stood, cast the spell on himself, and one by one they all scored 100. “Well, that’s something, anyway. Okay, that’s about it for now. Any questions?”

No one had any. “Okay, just one more thing,” said Kingsley. “Harry, we’re going to take a bit of a break from your training, partly because we need to give our people some days off, too, and Neville wouldn’t be up to it anyway. We might want to resume in a week or so. But while there’s still some summer left, we were hoping you could start training us. We don’t seem to be getting anywhere on the energy of

love by ourselves. We wondered if you would start some sessions with some of us, in whatever way or group you think is best. It would be entirely up to you.”

“Sure, I don’t mind at all,” Harry agreed. “I’ll think about the details, and let you know in a day or two. It would have to be people who really want to do it, though.”

Kingsley chuckled. “Harry, we all want to do this, really badly. We know what could be involved. I mean, for example, you’re not going to meet anyone more... reserved than Dawlish. He doesn’t speak unless he has to, but he’d spill his guts about anything you asked him to, to do this. There’s no motivation problem.”

“I guess I can believe that. Okay, I think it would be best to do it with the people I know best, for starters. That would be you, Cassandra, Tonks, Winston, and Jack. I’d also like Neville, so I could have help, and he knows you all too. I’ll talk to him about it, and I’ll let you know.” Harry paused, thinking for a few seconds. “There’s something else. I would want whoever does it to... how do I say this... you all can do the Killing Curse, like you did against that giant. I don’t know this for a fact, but I really think it’s the case that if you can use the Killing Curse, you can’t use the energy of love. It’s just a feeling, a very strong feeling. Whoever does this has to not use the Killing Curse, I mean, make a decision not to use it. I really think that’s necessary.”

Again, Kingsley appeared unhappy. “I can see why you say that, but it could be a bit of a problem for some of us, especially me. It’s very rare that we use it, but there could be times when it’s necessary. I don’t like the idea that somebody doesn’t have that weapon at their disposal if they really needed it. And I say ‘especially me’ because I’m a senior Auror, and in many cases where it’s necessary to kill, I would have to give the order. I might not be able to do what I need to do in a bad situation if I accepted that. I’m assuming that for your purposes, giving an order to kill isn’t that different from actually doing it myself, right?”

“I would think so,” Harry agreed. “I don’t know what to say, Kingsley. I see your point, but I think this is important. I suppose we could try it where the others

decide not to use the Killing Curse under any circumstances, and you decide not to use it or order it used unless you feel you absolutely have to, where lives are at stake if you don't. I don't know if that's going to work, but it seems worth a try. You have to decide that it's an absolute last resort."

Kingsley was silent for a moment. "I don't know if I can even do that, Harry. I mean, I can't say it was an absolute last resort against the giant, but it was the right thing to do. I mean tactically right, not morally right. I don't like the idea that I can't decide to do something like that; it's not compatible with being a leader in the field. Tell you what, I'll think about it, and we'll talk again when you decide on the details of how it's going to work."

Harry nodded, then looked as if he had just remembered something. "There's something I wanted to ask Ginny, but I want to here, because you'd be involved too." Looking at Ginny, he said, "I want to do something, something I don't usually do, because this is over. I want us to go to dinner, in Diagon Alley, in some nice restaurant. Like the Golden Dragon, or something like that."

Surprise registered on everyone's faces. "Sure, I'd love to," said Ginny, recovering. "But you're right, it's not like you. What made you want to do that?"

"I'm not sure, it just seemed like a nice idea," he said. "It's like, I don't want to be cowed into never going out in public. Lots of people do stuff like that, and I never have. I think I'd like to. Also, I never had anyone like you to do it with." They exchanged a smile.

"Count me in," she said, clearly very pleased.

Kingsley looked amused. "Your first date. I assume I'm involved because of security considerations."

Harry became serious. "Yes, and if it's any kind of problem at all, I won't do it. I'd rather not inconvenience you at all for something like this—"

Kingsley waved him off. "Don't be ridiculous, Harry, you helped end this thing. You deserve something like this, and there'll be no shortage of volunteers. What day and time were you thinking of?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe... Friday, seven-thirty?"

"Sure, no problem. In addition to the security, you should let me take care of the arrangements, and the reservations. I'd rather the reservations weren't in your name, because it could get out, and we don't want people knowing that sort of thing in advance. I'll talk to the restaurant manager, just tell him it's V.I.P.'s, so when you go there, tell them that I made your reservations." Kingsley smiled. "Of course, even if you showed up unannounced and with the restaurant full, because you're Harry Potter they'd probably conjure up a table and move everyone over a bit. But it's better to do it this way. Okay, consider it done. And have a nice time, you do deserve it.

"One last thing, all of you, and you can tell Hermione and Neville too... as long as you're on the kind of detached duty you'll all be on, you'll still be working for us, so to speak. So you should feel free to wear those robes whenever you want to, at home or in public." Harry saw a proud smile break out over Ron's face, as he knew it would; Ron had been very excited to put on Aurors' robes. "In fact, it's kind of better if you do, in case you get called. Okay, that's it. Our thanks to all of you, and tell Hermione and Neville, too. Now, relax and take care of yourselves."

They thanked Kingsley, got up, and headed to the fireplace. "Wow, wearing Aurors' robes in public!" enthused Ron as they walked. "Pansy, we have to go into Diagon Alley tomorrow, walk around, what do you say?"

She laughed at his enthusiasm. "You just want to be seen."

"You bet," he agreed. "Especially by Fred and George, they'll have a heart attack... and knowing them, they'll do it at the same time. I also want to celebrate Malfoy being in custody. Before I wouldn't have wanted to do this, but you're a lot safer now, so I don't mind."

"Sounds great to me," she agreed. "And Harry, that'll be interesting, dinner at the Golden Dragon. That's the fanciest restaurant in Diagon Alley. You should have a good time."

His arm around Ginny as they walked, Harry said, “I don’t know if this is part of what made me think of that, but it occurred to me that I’ve never been to a nice restaurant in my entire life. The Dursleys never took me, of course, and as a wizard there was never any reason to.” He smiled at Ginny. “Now there is.”

When they returned to the Burrow, it was twenty minutes after midnight, but Neville and Hermione were still up, sitting on the living room sofa. As Harry made his way through the fireplace behind the other three, he heard Neville comment, “So, I guess this means it’s over, huh?”

Harry realized Neville was referring to he and Ginny not starting a shift. “Yes, it is.” He went on to describe the Aurors’ plans for them for the future, and the rest of the conversation as Ron and Pansy joined Hermione and Neville on the sofa, while he and Ginny took chairs. As he finished, he noticed the Pensieve on the floor near the sofa, and raised his eyebrows inquiringly at Hermione.

“I just couldn’t bring myself to repeat that conversation again, or even hear it repeated,” she explained, answering his unasked question. “But Ron and Pansy need to hear it, of course. I already put my memory in there, they can take a look at it.”

Ron and Pansy were obviously less than enthusiastic at the prospect. “For pure entertainment value, I’d rather watch Harry catch Malfoy a few more times,” joked Pansy. “But yes, I suppose we should.” She put the Pensieve on the coffee table, and she and Ron put their fingers in.

Responding to Harry’s account of the conversation with Kingsley, Hermione said, “When Kingsley talked about us being on call, he didn’t mean Neville or I, I suppose?”

“No,” agreed Harry, looking first at Neville, then at Hermione. “I think you’ll be back when Kingsley and Cassandra think it’s okay, and you,” turning to Hermione, “when you’re back at 100. You know, I’m really sorry I had to—”

She cut him off. "I'm the one who's sorry, Harry." With a wry smile, she added, "It's becoming my new mantra. But you were right, you did have to, and it was very smart of you to think of doing it. If I had gone out on a call, had to try to use the spell and failed... it would have been extremely bad. I shouldn't have been snippy with you."

Harry shook his head. "I think we'd forgive you much more than that, right now."

"Obviously you do, considering what we're looking at, because of me."

"It's not only you," he protested. "She was right, I knew and I didn't say—"

"Oh, please, Harry, I thought you knew better than to take anything she said seriously," scoffed Hermione. "You had just been through this traumatic experience, and were facing another summer with the Dursleys, and you were going to think about whether I had done the right thing or not? She knows the circumstances you were in, and she only said that to try to justify taking from you what she can't take from me. I would never have listened to you if you'd tried to talk me out of it. I knew what was best, after all."

Much as he wanted to, Harry couldn't argue with what she had said. He changed the subject, and they chatted until Ron and Pansy finished watching the memory in the Pensieve. "No, Pansy's right, definitely not high-quality entertainment," commented Ron. "But your bit was pretty good, Neville. Nice show of support." Neville smiled in mild embarrassment.

"Of course the four of you have already talked about this," said Pansy. "I think we don't really need to ask. Being her 'friend' is totally out of the question, right?"

Not answering Pansy's question, Hermione turned to Ron. "I assume you feel the same way?"

Ron nodded. "It really comes down to you, of course," he said, looking at Harry. "You're in it much deeper than the rest of us. And I saw your face when she

mentioned the book, and I'd feel the same way. But I know you, there's just no way you would do this. Obviously, we're totally with you."

Hermione thanked them, and told them about the rest of the conversation she and the others had had earlier. They talked for another hour, about the Skeeter situation first, then other things as the conversation branched out. Finally at one-thirty, Ron and Pansy decided to go to bed, and Neville went through the fireplace back to his Auror quarters. Telling Pansy she would be up in a minute, Hermione lingered until the others were gone.

Keeping her voice down even though they were alone, Hermione asked Harry, "What happened with Snape? Did he have a session tonight?"

"Yeah, fourth day in a row," said Harry. "And no, fortunately, he didn't look at anything to do with the Skeeter thing. He went back to what he'd been doing before, going through my life year by year. He spent today's session at the end of our fourth year."

She raised her eyebrows. "That's good, but I'm a little surprised he didn't think this is worth keeping an eye on."

"Well, the other thing is what he usually does," pointed out Harry. "I think he only started looking at daily events because of the Apparation crisis and how it involved the Death Eaters. Now that that's over, he must not feel the need. He would consider the Skeeter thing just part of our personal lives, something he wouldn't have that much interest in."

"Well, thank goodness for small favors, anyway," said Hermione. "Okay, I'm going to bed too. Good night."

Harry and Ginny were alone on the sofa. "I guess we have to get back to our usual sleep schedule now," she said. "Somehow I think if we go up to our beds, we're not going to get much sleep."

"No, I guess we're better off just staying awake through the night, then going to sleep early tomorrow night," he agreed. Trying to keep a straight face, he

continued, “It’s about four and a half hours until people start waking up here. Now, what are we going to do with all that time?”

“You’re just trying to torment me,” she grinned. “What you really mean is, would there be anything wrong with taking Fawkes back to your quarters?”

Now grinning along with her, he said, “Yes, that must be what I meant. But I wouldn’t think so; Molly just wanted to be able to know where we were. We could just leave a note.” She agreed, and they did.

Harry heard the footsteps moving down the stairs, and looked up at the living room clock. It was a quarter after six, which Harry guessed was the usual time Molly got up. He then heard the padding of slippers on the floor as she came into the living room. He and Ginny were on the sofa, his arm around her, their feet up on the coffee table, reading *From Albus, To Harry* together.

“Good morning, dears. Oh, it’s so nice that you’re reading that together,” said Molly as she peered over their shoulders. “I’ve had a few peeks at it some days when I’ve been cleaning, it’s really wonderful. Have you been reading it all night?”

“Well, not *all* night,” said Ginny, looking up at her mother with amusement.

Molly feigned exasperation. “Do you see that, Harry? My daughter is taunting me. Give them an inch... Thank goodness you don’t do that, you’re much too nice to.”

“No, he’s much too embarrassed to,” Ginny corrected her mother. Harry smiled but said nothing, hoping to avoid becoming involved in the conversation at all.

“I think it’s cute that you’re embarrassed about it,” said Molly.

Speaking before he thought, Harry responded, “Well, I’m embarrassed about *talking* about it, but not...” He trailed off as he realized what he was about to say, and went back to reading the book as Molly and Ginny laughed.

“It’s probably a good idea to think about where a sentence will end before you start it,” Ginny suggested, then leaned over to kiss him. Molly chatted with

them about the previous day's events, expressing her pleasure that the Apparation crisis was over, and that they planned to go to the Golden Dragon.

"Arthur and I went there once, for our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, it was very nice. I really wouldn't want to do that sort of thing so often, but it was a nice change." Molly spent a few minutes telling them about the experience, then headed off to the kitchen to start breakfast. Harry and Ginny continued reading until Pansy and Hermione came down a half hour later; they chatted with them about the contents of Dumbledore's book until breakfast was ready. Harry went upstairs to put the book away and see if Ron wanted to come down for breakfast.

"Well?" asked Pansy as Harry came back into the kitchen and sat down at the table. Arthur walked into the kitchen and sat down as well.

"He seems to be thinking about it," said Harry. "He said something, but I couldn't quite make it out. I think it might have been 'go away.'"

"Sounds like a good guess," said Pansy.

"Well, that could be your future, Pansy," said Ginny, deadpan. Pansy gave Ginny a mildly annoyed look as Hermione and Molly smiled.

"Come on, Ginny, it's way too soon to think about that. I mean, we just got together a few weeks ago," protested Pansy, though she clearly knew she was being teased. "Give us some time. It's a year before we could think about doing anything anyway."

"Well, you are both of age," pointed out Ginny, persisting. "You could have the Joining of Hands done." Now Harry chuckled, imagining what Ron's reaction would be if he heard that. Pansy gave Ginny a 'very funny' smile.

"You know, I hear people talking about that at work once in a while, since you two had it done," said Arthur conversationally. "Before that, I'd hardly ever heard it mentioned. People still think it's a bit strange, because it's so uncommon. And some of the younger men, you know how they are about commitment, they were joking that it should be called the 'Shackling of Wrists.' A few have asked me why in the world I would let my fifteen-year-old daughter have it done."

Molly smiled. “Did you tell them it was because your forty-nine-year-old wife thought it was a good idea?”

“No, but that would have been a good answer too,” chuckled Arthur. “No, I just said, ‘Do you think we would have allowed it if it had been anyone but him?’”

Everyone at the table but Harry laughed. “Good answer,” said Ginny, smiling at Harry, who focused on trying not to be embarrassed.

“None of the women asked me that, though,” said Arthur. “Especially the ones with children, they know that we all want to see our children married well. One of them said to me, ‘Six sons and one daughter, but you really hit the jackpot with her!’”

There was more laughter as Hermione said, “Arthur, I think Harry’s starting to wonder whether you’re trying to embarrass him, or if it’s purely by accident.”

“I’m just saying what people said, so it’s their fault, not mine,” said Arthur innocently.

“I’m just wondering, Arthur,” said Hermione, “was there anybody who thought you did the wrong thing?. I mean, it occurred to me, some people who don’t know Harry and Ginny might think, she was fifteen and a half, it’s too young to let her make that kind of important life decision. She can always do it when she’s seventeen, there’s no hurry. Did anybody say that?”

Arthur thought. “Not in just those words, but something like that, yes. And a key phrase there is ‘people who don’t know Harry and Ginny.’ I mean, I don’t get the impression that you or the others thought that. It’s not an unreasonable argument, of course. Or, you could say, it’s a good argument on paper, but in real life... we knew perfectly well Ginny wasn’t going to feel any differently when she was seventeen. The only reason not to do it was one that just made sense in theory. Looking at them both, talking to them, you just knew. So you could say, the lesson here is to not judge situations you don’t really know.”

Despite the potential for being further embarrassed, Harry was curious enough to ask a question. “Were you kidding, then, about the ‘if it was anybody but

me' thing? It could have been someone else she felt this way about, after all." Ginny looked at him sharply, an incredulous expression on her face. "Well, theoretically," Harry added hastily.

Arthur grinned at their interaction. "No, I wasn't kidding, Harry. And the point, I hope you know, isn't that you're 'Harry Potter' as such, just that it was you. We knew you well, we had already sort of adopted you, we knew what kind of person you are. It's not impossible that she could have fallen for some other boy, theoretically," he added, forestalling Ginny's objection, "who was a really good person, but we wouldn't have approved the Joining of Hands because we wouldn't have known them, not like we know you. But it has nothing to do with anything the public associates with Harry Potter."

"Another factor, I suspect," added Molly, "is that we fell in love in sixth year at Hogwarts, when we were sixteen; I was just a half a year older when I fell in love with Arthur than Ginny was with Harry. And Arthur and I were sure we would end up together, so it's hard for us to subscribe to the 'they're too young to know what they're doing' school of thought."

As she spoke, an owl flew in with a copy of the Daily Prophet, which fell in front of Hermione. Ron walked down the stairs, looking half-awake. "Morning, Ron," said Ginny. "Did you sleep in those?"

Ron glanced down at his Aurors' robes as he took a seat. "No, it's a bit warm for that. But I get your point, so I will say that yes, I plan to wear them at every available opportunity until the term starts. So if you'd like to make fun of me for that, go right ahead."

"Not quite so much fun now," said Ginny resignedly.

"Glad to hear it," replied Ron.

For the next two minutes everyone focused on eating; the only noise was the clinking of silverware and the rustling of Hermione's newspaper. Finally, Hermione sighed and said, "Well, Skeeter is now officially active. Front page of today's Prophet: 'Harry Potter's Tragic Childhood.'"

“They let her write?” asked Ron disbelievingly, as Harry winced. “While she’s up on charges of being an unregistered Animagus?”

“Apparently so,” confirmed Hermione. “I just read the article. It’s pure Skeeter. Most of it’s true, but she gives it a flourish, you could say, and makes it seem worse than it is. Which is quite a feat, in Harry’s case, because his childhood was pretty bad. The article is favorable to you, Harry; you’re the tragic, unwanted orphan, cruelly treated by uncaring, selfish Muggles.”

“Isn’t that pretty much the truth, though?” pointed out Ron.

“Yes,” she agreed, “but it’s just the way she says things. For example, Harry, you’ve said they never hit you. She doesn’t say they did, but she implies that with all this other stuff, they must have. It mentions the cupboard under the stairs and Dudley’s second bedroom, and how he bullied you, but at the end says how you nobly rose above such belittlements and are now nice to Dudley, even if you can’t quite find it in your heart to forgive your aunt and uncle. It heavily emphasizes the Dursleys-are-anti-wizard angle. She makes Dudley look kind of bad, but redeemed, and your aunt and uncle are the true villains of the piece. Listen to this: ‘All evidence sadly points to the conclusion that if the true story of how Harry was treated were presented as fiction, it would be considered ‘over-the-top’ and scarcely believable, and his aunt and uncle, two-dimensional caricatures with no visible redeeming qualities.’ And of course, in true Skeeter fashion... you’ve said more than once that you think they were that way because of what happened to your mother, that her sister was scared of wizards because of that. No mention of that anywhere.”

“Well, it’s a good thing they don’t get the Prophet,” said Molly.

“Oh, they’ll get this,” said Hermione with certainty. “Skeeter will have had it sent to them. Harry may look good in this, but she didn’t do it to be nice to him.”

“Could I see it?” asked Harry.

“You’re going to read it?” asked Hermione in surprise as she handed it to him. “I thought you wouldn’t want to.”

“I don’t, really, but I’m sure I’m going to be hearing about it, so I’d better read it so I won’t be surprised to hear what’s in it,” grumbled Harry. He wondered how many times in the future he would be reading unpleasant articles about himself for the same reason.

The article was indeed relentlessly negative toward Vernon and Petunia, casting them in a worse light than even Harry felt they deserved. As he read, Harry realized the article’s own special meaning as a message from her to him: it was part promise, it made him look good, meant to encourage him to be her ‘friend,’ but it was also part warning, as she understood that he had avoided discussing his relatives publicly and would not have wanted the article to be written. Harry felt the message was that if he became her enemy, the articles would get a lot worse. He felt a wave of despair as he remembered the threatened book, which would become a reality if he rejected her proposal, which he knew he would do. He glanced to his right and saw an extremely glum look on Hermione’s face; he wondered if she had been keeping an eye on him as he read the article, and felt even worse about the difficulty he was in.

Finishing, he handed the paper to Ginny, saying, “Did you see the thing at the end, that little footnote that acknowledges that she’s an unregistered Animagus, but swears she didn’t use that ability for this article? That’s the biggest lie here. I mean, there are things I said on Tuesday at Privet Drive in here, and she was definitely a beetle there.”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, I noticed. I have to imagine it’s for the sake of form, on the part of the Prophet. They know it’s a lie, but they pretend they believe her, so they’re covered, legally speaking. By the way, where did she get the quotes from Dudley?”

“That was from the day I caught Malfoy, just before I found her hiding in my robes,” said Harry. “Pansy had asked him why his parents treated me like they did. I’m not surprised she used it, it fits with her story really well.”

“It makes them look worse than almost anything else in the article, really,” agreed Hermione. “He basically admits that they raised him to treat you badly. Your aunt and uncle are going to be furious, I’d imagine. What are you going to do about that?”

Harry shrugged. “I know this doesn’t sound nice, but it is the first thought that pops into my head, and it’s the truth: I really don’t care. This article may not be exactly the truth, but it’s close enough that I don’t feel bad about it. They’ll read this and think it’s all lies, maybe lies I’ve told. They’ll never recognize themselves in the article, and I don’t care if they do. I’m just lucky I wasn’t living there when this happened, I don’t have to hear their reaction.”

“How can they not recognize themselves, if what the article says is mostly true?” wondered Ron.

“When you get a little older, Ron,” said Arthur, adopting a humorous tone that suggested he was older than he was, “you’ll discover that people have all kinds of ways to avoid dealing with unpleasant facts about themselves—”

“Like deciding they’re right all the time,” put in Hermione gloomily.

There was silence for a few seconds, as the others were taken aback by Hermione’s uncharacteristic attitude. Then Pansy looked at Hermione sympathetically. “You’re starting to remind me of how I was last year, when every other word out of my mouth was something negative about myself. I seem to recall you and Harry telling me to go easier on myself, not to beat myself up all the time.”

Hermione sighed. “Yes, but at least no one was paying for your mistakes any more. Harry’s paying for mine, and he may for quite some time.”

“How do you mean, Hermione?” asked Molly. “Wouldn’t she be writing about Harry like this anyway, and wouldn’t she have been doing it all along if you hadn’t put a stop to it?”

“No, she wouldn’t have the kind of information she does, if not for what I had done.” Hermione took a deep breath, then explained to Molly and Arthur what Skeeter had threatened. “So, obviously, we’re not going to do what she wants,”

concluded Hermione. “But unless we can do something to stop her, Harry’s in for a pretty bad time.”

Molly was clearly horrified, and even Arthur reacted strongly. “That evil, awful, despicable woman...” exclaimed Molly.

“But it’s my fault, if I hadn’t done what I did—”

Molly pointed a finger at Hermione. “You didn’t make her become an unregistered Animagus and use her ability like that, Hermione. Don’t you blame yourself for that. You’re responsible for what you did, and she’s responsible for what she’s done.”

Arthur nodded. “She’s right, of course. Suppose you had turned her in, like you now say you should have done. That would be very reasonable, nobody would argue with that. Nobody, including you, would now be suggesting you did anything wrong. But couldn’t she have just gone off and done the same thing anyway? Said, ‘I can’t be a reporter anymore, so I’m going to get revenge on the one who found me out by making her life and that of her friends miserable?’ And would you be responsible for that? Of course not. So you’re not responsible for this, either.

“You see, Hermione—and this gets back to what I was starting to say a minute ago, about how people avoid reality—we all create for ourselves what you could call our own narrative, our own story. It’s what we tell ourselves about ourselves. For some people it’s pretty close to the ‘objective truth,’ if there is such a thing, and for some, like Harry’s aunt and uncle, it’s probably fairly far away. But they couldn’t live with themselves if they had to see themselves in terms of what they really did to Harry, so they tell themselves something else.”

“I overheard them once,” put in Harry. “They tell themselves that they were ‘strict’ with me.”

“Yes, that’s a good example,” agreed Arthur. “It’s all right to be strict, so they can tell themselves that and be okay with that. Though I wonder how they justify the cupboard-under-the-stairs thing... but I digress. If we more or less accept the idea that we should behave morally, but we don’t, then we build a

narrative that justifies our actions. Ironically, the narrative for someone like Voldemort would be very close to the objective truth, because he has no need to put what he does in any kind of moral context, or justify it to himself. To him, power is its own justification. As for Skeeter, she probably has a fairly twisted narrative by now. Probably one element of it is the idea that it's all right to be an unregistered Animagus. She might think, everyone breaks the law a little, so why not me, or, it's my body, I should be able to do what I want with it without having to tell the government."

"Another," said Pansy, "would be the idea that it's all right to write articles the way she does, that leave people with a wrong impression. She said it to them yesterday, with all these justifications. Articles would be boring, intelligent people understand, everybody does it."

"Another good example," said Arthur. "So if you look at it like she does—that it's perfectly reasonable to be an unregistered Animagus, to use that ability to get stories, to write those stories in whatever biased way makes them most interesting—then what Hermione did looks pretty bad. No doubt she feels totally victimized by Hermione, and so justifies just about anything she's done, or will do. Now, Hermione, part of my point is that you don't have to accept that. In your haste to blame yourself for what Harry may suffer, you overlook the fact that she's responsible for her own actions. All you have to ask yourself is whether what you did was morally wrong. I'm not so sure it was. You only made her stop writing for a while; exposure probably would have done it permanently. Once the charges against her start to go through the system, I don't think she'll be writing for the Prophet anymore. You gave her more of a break than you had to."

Hermione was silent, digesting what Arthur had said. "I could accept that, and partly I do... but the problem is, I've thought about it now enough to know that I did do it for revenge. So I am morally culpable, which makes it easier to blame myself. I do understand that she didn't have to do this, that she chose it. But thinking about what has happened, to Neville... what will happen, to Harry

especially, but the others too... no amount of rational thinking can get me past that, at least not right now.”

Harry remembered how he had felt when Sirius died, when the students died at Hogsmeade, and found that he could identify all too easily with how Hermione felt. He found that despite what lay ahead for him, he felt worse for her than he did for himself.

Neville came over at nine-thirty, and at ten Ron and Pansy left for Diagon Alley, both in their Aurors’ robes. Harry sat in the living room talking to Ginny, Neville, and Hermione. At one point he went upstairs for a few minutes, and when he came back down, he was surprised to see Hugo Brantell standing with the others.

“Hugo!” he said, as they shook hands. “It’s good to see you. What are you doing here?”

“I mainly came to talk to Neville and Hermione, for the article on what happened to them the other day,” Hugo replied. “But it seems like you guys are already onto another crisis. You certainly have interesting lives.”

“We live in ‘interesting times,’” muttered Hermione.

Hugo noticed Harry’s puzzled expression. “Hermione’s referring to a well-known old Chinese saying, which I assume she knows because she reads a lot,” he said, giving her a quick grin. “If you wish someone ill, you say, ‘may you live in interesting times.’ The idea is that most things that make a time period interesting are bad things. It’s like a variation on ‘no news is good news.’ I mean, don’t I usually show up after something bad has happened?”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” said Harry. “It does seem that we live in an extremely interesting time. But you said ‘another’ crisis. Did they tell you about it already? I was only upstairs for a few minutes.”

Hugo chuckled. “You keep forgetting about my special powers, Harry. No, they haven’t said anything, but their mood, combined with my understanding of general circumstances and, if I may be so immodest, above-average analytical skills,

tells me quite a lot about the situation. Why don't I tell you what I've gathered, and you can tell me the rest if you want?" Intrigued, Harry and the others nodded.

"Okay... first, now of course I know what Hermione did with Skeeter: made her stop writing on pain of it being revealed that she was an Animagus. After Fudge was killed and Skeeter was exposed, Hermione lost her hold on Skeeter, and it's not a leap to imagine that Skeeter's spoiling for revenge. And since you six are a unit, she'll take it out on all of you, Harry being the fattest target. I'm not sure exactly how today's article fits into that, but I'm sure it does somehow; maybe she wants to start off being nice to you before she rips into you. Also, given the nature of the quotes in the article, and that I know you would never give her quotes, she's been following you around as a beetle. Finally, given the palpable sense of crisis here, I gather that she's made some threats, or is trying to blackmail you in some way. How's that?"

The four teenagers exchanged impressed looks. "Amazing, as usual," said Hermione. "She visited us yesterday, and made her demands. I was going to show you in the Pensieve, but now it looks like there's no point. We were actually going to call you anyway, Hugo, to ask for your advice and help. We're in a pretty bad situation."

He nodded. "Sure, I'll do what I can. But I'd still like to see what happened in the Pensieve anyway. It's not the same as being in person, but I can still pick up stuff that most people wouldn't. I might be able to get useful information."

Harry realized with a start that a reference to Snape would be included in that. "Hermione, would you come with me for a second? Excuse us, Hugo." He pulled Hermione into the kitchen. "She mentions the thing with Snape!" he whispered. "You can't show it to him!"

"Relax, Harry, I did think of that. I showed Ron and Pansy, remember? I edited out that part, and I will for Hugo too."

He nodded, calming down. “Sorry, I should have known.” They went back into the living room. “Sorry, Hugo, it’s just that there was something in there that I can’t tell you, as much for personal as for operational reasons.”

“It’s all right, Harry,” Hugo said humorously. “I don’t expect to know every secret from every person I deal with.”

“Bet you know most of them, though,” replied Harry as Hermione put her memory into the Pensieve.

Hugo grinned. “I try to be extremely discreet.” He entered the Pensieve. When he returned, he had an impressed look. “I must say, I didn’t think she’d go quite that far.”

“Like I said, it’s pretty bad,” said Hermione glumly.

“Yes, it is,” agreed Hugo. “Now, my analysis. First of all, the bit at the end, where she threatened to reveal operational information... it was easy to tell that that’s an empty threat, she’s not going to do it if you refuse. Sorry, when you refuse. She knows the Prophet would never let her do it, and it would be too great a risk to her anyway. As for the book, and the other things she threatened you with, obviously she is very serious about that. The fact is, she hopes you’ll say no. She wants the money and the access to Harry, but viscerally, she wants to make Hermione suffer even more, and she knows that making Harry suffer is an excellent way to do that. She thinks you’ll say no, but she isn’t sure; she knows perfectly well how the book will affect Harry, and thinks there’s at least a chance he’ll cave. If he did cave, she would intend to hold up her part of the bargain—there would be no book—but she would expect to own you, in a sense, that you’d be able to refuse her no request.” He shook his head in wonder. “I’ve seen a few disturbed people, and she’s definitely up there with them. One thing that might help you to understand why she’s like this is that before Hermione clipped her wings, she was the star of the magical journalism world. She had access at the highest levels, friends, her articles were popular—she is right when she says that having a ‘point of view’ makes articles more interesting to most people. She had disdain for those of us who

practiced balanced, ‘boring’ journalism. So, she had farther to fall when she did, and the fall hurt more. She had a big ego, and it took a huge pounding. When she said what she did about friends and family, I could tell that that hurt her most, the loss of prestige. That drove her to this sort of nasty revenge as much as anything else.”

Listening to Hugo, Harry felt grateful that they would have his help. “So, now, the question is, what can we do? What should we do?”

“Well, Harry, obviously the facts of what you’ve done in the past year give you influence, and there would be high-level people in the magical world, maybe in the Ministry but also outside it, who would help you if you asked. The trick is to know who to ask, and to make sure the help is unconditional. You don’t want to find yourself in a position in the future where someone is under the impression that you owe them a favor, any favor they choose to ask. You also, obviously, can’t ask for anything illegal or unethical, as it gets you right into the same boat with a different person.

“Now, as to what I can do personally... what I would recommend is that you go on the offensive, and I can help you do that. I could write an article, an article that would bring all this out in the open. That she’s followed you, that she’s gotten information in highly unethical ways, that she blackmailed you for money and access. It is true that this would expose you to her following through on her threats, but since you were going to refuse her demands, she was going to do that anyway. This would put her on the defensive and make her look very bad, which of course she deserves. This wouldn’t stop her from writing the book; as she said, nothing can stop that. But what it would accomplish is, first of all, legal consequences aside, she would never write for the Prophet again. I’m certain of that. Secondly, if she did find someone to print what she wrote, or just wrote the book, she would be highly discredited. Most people wouldn’t even believe the things she said about you that were true. I think that as far as the book goes, that’s as good a result as you could hope for.

“There would be one cost to doing this. Hermione, you would have to give an interview, and come clean about what you did two years ago, give all the details.” Harry gave a start, which Hugo noticed. “I know, Harry, but this is going to happen anyway. Skeeter is going to give her account of what Hermione did as soon as she knows you’re refusing her demands. At least this way, your version is the one that people hear first. We can get a legal opinion before I do this; I know she puts herself in very minor legal jeopardy by admitting it as opposed to simply being accused, but she’d have to admit it anyway unless she wanted to publicly lie about it, which I can tell she doesn’t want to do. I’m sure, though, that nothing would happen to her. The other positive thing about this is that it makes Skeeter look even worse, that she’s trying to take it out of Harry’s skin for what Hermione did. Harry will come off looking extremely sympathetic. Hermione won’t look so good, but probably no worse than misguided. The article would extensively re-quote the things that upset you, Hermione, and you would explain why you felt victimized enough to do what you did. A lot of people would understand, and also admire the fact that you were clever enough to figure her out and catch her.

“Very strictly speaking, what I’m suggesting would be unethical on my part, as my motive in writing an article is supposed to be only to inform people, not accomplish some goal.” With a small grin, he added, “My article would have a ‘point of view.’ But it would still be far less unethical than any article she’s ever written, and you guys are in a position you don’t deserve to be in. Also, my article would be the truth; I can live with it very easily. So, if you’d like to take some time to think about it—”

Hermione cut him off. “No, we don’t need to. We’ll do it.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “Whatever happened to deciding things as a group?”

“Not this one.” She stepped up to him, her gaze earnest and determined, her voice full of emotion. “Harry, this is perfect. The best thing about it is that it takes the heat off you and puts it on me, where it belongs. And like he said, what I

did was going to be exposed anyway. This is best for me, as well as you. But you have to know that I would expose myself to this anyway. I should be the one to take the consequences, if there are any. It's killed me that first Neville, then you, would suffer for what I did. Please don't argue with me. You would do this, in my position. It's the right thing to do."

Harry wanted to find arguments to make, but there were none; he knew she was right. He felt his chest tighten; he looked down, then at her, and nodded, resigned. She looked at him appreciatively, also saying nothing.

She turned to Hugo. "Thank you, Hugo. I appreciate this, more than I can say. Well, you can probably tell anyway even if I can't say. When would it be printed?"

"The Sunday Prophet is perfect. Her deadline is Monday, so that gives you maximum time to do whatever else you're going to do, and it also has the largest readership, which, while not ideal for you personally, Hermione—"

"I understand," she interrupted, hoping to forestall another objection from Harry. "That sounds good. When should we do it?"

"Probably Saturday. Better to do it as late as possible in case anything changes. For now, of course, we should do the one I came for. That is, Neville, if you're up to it. I waited a few days because I know this was terrible for you, and if you'd like more time, that's fine."

"No, now is okay," agreed Neville. "Just as well to get it over with now. I'm sorry, I don't mean—well, never mind, you know what I mean. You probably did before I said anything."

Hugo smiled. "Yes, but I find it makes people more comfortable if I let them say things instead of telling them what they were going to say. It's not me personally, it's talking about what happened. I totally understand."

As Hugo finished his sentence, there was a small explosion in the fireplace. To the shock of Harry and his friends, Dudley walked out.

Harry gaped in disbelief. “D-Dudley?” he managed to get out. Dudley grinned at Harry’s astonishment.

After a few seconds of silence, Hugo stepped forward. “Hi, Dudley. I’m Hugo Brantell, a journalist. I wrote the articles about Harry over the past year, but not the one today, as I’m sure you know.”

“Nice to meet you,” replied Dudley. “So, you’re the one that can read people’s minds?”

Hugo chuckled. “Not quite—”

“Seems that way sometimes,” Neville put in humorously.

“So, what am I thinking?” asked Dudley, obviously very interested.

“Well, as I was saying, it’s not exactly mind-reading,” said Hugo. “It’s that I can tell a person’s mood, and whether or not they’re being truthful. Would you like me to tell you what your mood is?” Dudley nodded eagerly. “Well,” continued Hugo, with the air of one who had done the same thing for people’s entertainment many times, “your mood is mainly one of excitement at the moment. Not only excitement for doing something you’re not supposed to—your mother will go berserk if she finds out you’ve done this—but also for just coming over here, to this other world you’ve heard about but never seen. You’ve wanted to do this for some time, but haven’t had a good enough reason until now, to talk to Harry about the article this morning. And as I mention the article, I see that you’re definitely not a big fan of Rita Skeeter, but at least you understand that Harry had nothing to do with it.” Hugo smiled again. “So, how was that?”

Now Dudley was gaping. “Wow, amazing,” he enthused. “Pretty cool ability, for a reporter. You don’t even have to ask people questions, do you?”

“No, I do, they just don’t have to answer them,” joked Hugo. “But I let them do it anyway, just to be polite.” As he spoke, Crookshanks came bounding down the stairs.

“Crookshanks!” said Hermione happily. “What are you—oh, I see, you’re checking him out. So, what do you think?” After regarding Dudley in what Harry

felt was a slightly haughty manner for a few seconds, Crookshanks rubbed his face against Dudley's shin, then turned and went out through the front door. "Must be going to chase the gnomes, he does love it here. Congratulations, Dudley, you passed inspection." To Dudley's quizzical expression, she explained, "You see, Crookshanks is part Kneazle, which is kind of a catlike magical creature. That's why he doesn't look exactly like a normal cat. Kneazles are well known for being able to detect untrustworthy people."

"Seems like kind of a strange talent," mused Dudley. Harry had never thought of it that way, but felt that Dudley was right.

Hugo turned to Neville. "Neville, Hermione, where would you like to do it?"

"The kitchen, I guess," suggested Hermione.

"Okay. Oh, and Harry, I'd like a few words with you, too, about rescuing them. And from Fawkes, too, if he can spare the time," Hugo joked.

"He should get all the credit, all I did was slow him down," Harry replied. "Sure, I'll be around." Hugo, Neville, and Hermione walked to the kitchen, leaving Harry, Ginny, and Dudley alone.

"Fawkes is the phoenix, right?" asked Dudley.

He remembers a lot from those articles, thought Harry. "Yes, he—oh, there he is," said Harry as Fawkes appeared and perched on Harry's shoulder. Dudley's eyes went wide. He made a silent request to pet Fawkes; Harry nodded, and Dudley did.

"Wow, really soft. So, what does he do?"

"Saves my life, mostly," Harry half-joked. "It's kind of hard to explain. He can travel from anywhere to anywhere in a blink, and can carry me, so that's often very helpful. The other thing phoenixes are well known for is their calming qualities. Just being around him makes me calmer. And of course their song, they're pretty famous for that." As Harry finished the sentence, Fawkes started singing, stopping after about twenty seconds. Dudley was clearly enraptured.

“Wow... I could listen to that for hours,” he said. Harry noticed that it was the third time Dudley had said ‘wow’ in the past few minutes.

“I have, before,” said Harry. “He doesn’t do it that often, though, mainly when I particularly need it. Which is often enough, considering how my life is.” He and Ginny sat down on the sofa, and he motioned Dudley to a chair. “Well, I don’t need to ask, or to be Hugo, to know that your mother had a fit this morning. Hell, she probably had one just from the paper arriving, never mind the article.”

“Yeah, she was surprised to get a whole paper, not just a clipping. Why did we get one, anyway?”

“Skeeter clearly had it sent to you. This is part of her campaign of harassment against me. She’s written nasty things about me before; she only made me look good in this article so your parents would look worse by comparison, and blame me for it. She wanted Petunia to assume I cooperated with it, to make her and Vernon look bad.”

Dudley nodded. “Worked like a charm, then. That’s exactly what happened.”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, but it’s like shooting fish in a barrel. All it takes for your mother to blame me for anything is my involvement in it in any way. You know that.”

Dudley chuckled. “Yeah, I suppose. But it’s been a while since I’ve seen her this mad. Dad too, a bit, but especially Mum. I did try to tell her that it was written by someone you didn’t like, but I’m not sure she even heard me. Too busy ranting.”

Harry was not at all surprised; in fact, he would have been surprised if anything else had been the case. “Here’s the funny thing. She knows I’m a big celebrity in the wizarding world, and she knows that in the Muggle world, celebrities’ families are often written about in the tabloids, and the celebrities would rather the stories weren’t written, whether they’re true or not. She knows this, but it would never enter her mind that this wasn’t something I wanted. It would never occur to her to give me the benefit of the doubt. Just the opposite; she would

always start out from the idea that whatever made me look worst was right, and go from there.”

“But you can see why she was mad, though,” Dudley pointed out, “and why she blamed you. It really looked like you were trashing them.”

“Yes, it did, I wouldn’t argue with that,” agreed Harry. “I can see why they’d be really angry. But... I’m wondering, Dudley... besides what Hugo said, about wanting to see our world, why did you come over here?”

Dudley looked as though he didn’t quite know how to answer the question at first. “I guess I wanted to know what you thought, how it looked to you. I had kind of figured out that the article wasn’t something you wanted, from the way you acted with her the other day. You were pretty mad. Also, you had chances to trash them in interviews for the other articles, and you didn’t, you tried not to answer the questions. I wanted to be able to tell Mum what you thought of it, and that you weren’t attacking them.”

Harry made a gesture of indifference. “It’s not going to do any good, Dudley. She’s going to think what she thinks.”

Ginny spoke up. “Maybe, but it wouldn’t hurt to tell Dudley anyway, since he’s here. Maybe it will change something, you can’t know.”

Harry looked at her with affection, and took her hand. “It’s not impossible that you’re right, but you’ve never met his mother. I hope you never have to.”

“Probably better that I don’t,” she acknowledged. “I’d have a few things to say, and there’d probably be a screaming match. But still...”

Sighing, Harry acquiesced. “All right, if you want to tell her something, Dudley, this is what you can tell her. I had nothing to do with the article, I wasn’t interviewed for it, and if there was some way I could have prevented it from being written, I would have. The times I’m quoted in the article were from when I was talking to friends, and the reporter overheard... well, you can explain to her how that worked. The quotes were taken out of context, of course. And there were some things that weren’t in the article that should have been. For example, I’m sure

Skeeter has heard me say that I think your parents are the way they are about wizards because they're scared of them, but she didn't mention it. I have no desire to make them look bad.

“But, and you can say this to them or not, the fact is that the article isn't that far from the truth. All the quotes from me are accurate, and they're true. All of the facts she relates are true; it's her implications and the way she makes things sound that are wrong. If they deny that they treated me badly, then they're fooling themselves. Not that I care whether they fool themselves or not.”

“The overall impression I get,” said Ginny, looking at Harry compassionately, “is that you don't care what they think.”

Harry shook his head. “I can't care what they think. That's... almost so fundamental to me that I wouldn't have thought to even say it. I mean... it's funny, I never thought about this consciously before, but... a few times at Muggle schools, before I was eleven, I got complimented or praised by teachers. Not often, but occasionally. It always felt strange, because it never happened at home, not once. I remember a few times when I tried to get her to say something nice about something I did, like a good score on a test, something I made for art class, like that. She either brushed me off or criticized it; I never got approval from them for anything, not once. I learned not to expect it, or hope for it. I would have been...” he paused and shrugged, looking for a phrase, “emotionally crushed, I guess, if I had. I had to not care about what they thought, it would have been too painful if I had. It was my way of coping, I guess.” He paused, and with a small chuckle, said, “Skeeter would have loved this, to hear me say this and put it in the article. Fits in well with the ‘poor, tragic Harry’ theme. Anyway, so I just can't care what they think now. And I wouldn't care to try to work it out with them, it would be impossible. You know how they are about this, Dudley. They don't like to talk about things like this, and they would never be willing to admit what they did, or apologize. There would be no point.”

Ginny's grip on his hand had grown tighter as he talked. After he finished, she moved closer to him on the sofa and pulled him into a hug. At first mildly embarrassed because Dudley was there, he decided he didn't care. "It's all right," he said quietly. "It was a long time ago."

"I know," she said. He could hear the sadness in her voice. "I feel like I just want to hug you then, who you were then. I'm sure you could have used it."

His first thought was that that time was past, that it was too late, but he didn't want to say it to her. He just said, "Thanks," and they let go. Dudley was looking down; Harry wondered if he was trying hard not to react. He knew Dudley hardly ever saw any displays of affection like that except on television, and would normally disdain them.

"Well," Harry continued, "that's in the past, and it isn't something I like to think about that much. Just don't see the point. I guess I just thought of it because it explains why I don't care what they think now. Anyway, Dudley... I'm not sure what else I can think of to say."

Dudley nodded, and was silent for a half a minute. Then he said, "So, are you still going to come and do that thing, so they can't, you know..."

"Sure. I don't have to like your mother, but I will humor her. Probably this weekend, but of course I have to talk to Kingsley. He's the one I was with the other day, he's a senior Auror. He needs to arrange for my protection while I do it."

"I was wondering, do you really need to be protected?" asked Dudley. "I mean, now you can stop that killing spell, and you're really strong, can they really hurt you?"

"Not very easily, no," agreed Harry. "I'm not even sure it's that necessary for them to protect me, not like it was last year. It's mainly to be careful, which I understand. There are other things they could do to me to kill me, and I'm important enough that they don't want to take a small chance. There's... reason to believe, and I can't be any more specific than that, that I'm the only person who can defeat Voldemort."

Dudley looked puzzled. “But that’s not any secret, is it? I mean, I read about it in the articles, it’s because of the energy-of-love thing, right? I thought that was the whole reason you found this in the first place, you needed it to fight him. From what you said, it sounds like love is like kryptonite to him.”

Harry chuckled. “Good analogy, that’s about right. I meant, there’s other reason to think so. Anyway, yeah, they just don’t want to take any chances. With all those attempts on my life in the past year, I can see why.” Harry paused, then said, “Well, since you’re here, let me give you a tour of the house, show you all the interesting magical stuff.”

Dudley grinned. “Cool, thanks. Also, I was wondering something... Mum’s gone for another couple hours, I thought maybe you could take me to that place that you said is like downtown London for wizards. I’d really like to see that.”

Harry’s face reflected his doubt. “I would, but it’s not a good time right now, for two reasons. One, I’d have to be protected, and the Aurors are tired from all the work they’ve been doing lately. I don’t want to put them out for something that’s not really necessary. Also, I’d be recognized by... well, pretty much everybody, and approached by some people, who would also want to know who you were. Then, it would be like, ‘This is my cousin, Dudley.’ ‘Oh, yes, I read about you this morning. Why did you need two bedrooms?’ Or, ‘Why were your parents so awful to him? Why should they hate wizards so much?’ You get the idea; it would be like with Ron and Pansy, only much worse. It wouldn’t be real pleasant for you.”

Dudley nodded in resignation. “Hadn’t thought of that. Too bad, I would’ve liked to see it.”

“You will, someday,” Harry assured him. “As time passes, people will forget about it. Well, let’s show you around.” They stood, and walked over to Molly’s special clock. “First, there’s this clock, which tells where every family member is, kind of. You see each person’s name on one of the hands, see, Arthur’s is ‘work’ and Molly’s is ‘shopping’... wait, there’s one for me? When did this happen?”

“I think she had it done just before we got back for the summer,” said Ginny. “She had Percy’s changed to be you.” They exchanged a look, remembering their sorrow for Molly at the loss of Percy. Harry briefly explained what had happened to Percy, then continued showing Dudley around.

CHAPTER 6

THE GOLDEN DRAGON

Harry wished he could have enjoyed the day off more, but the situation with Skeeter made it difficult to feel like relaxing. He had been through trials before, but they had usually involved an enemy he could fight, something he could do. Here there was nothing he could do but wait and see what happened. He spent the day with Ginny and his friends, and had yet another session with Snape, who told Harry that he would not be required Friday. Harry didn't know whether or not it was because of his dinner plans. He went to bed at nine o'clock, feeling odd sleeping in his bed at the Burrow again.

At ten to five the next day, Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Pansy were in the living room. Harry was teaching dueling to Ginny and Pansy, and Ron was playing his chess computer. The fireplace lit up, and Neville walked through, followed by Hermione. They had left to meet Kingsley at four o'clock; Harry was surprised that the meeting had taken so long. "That was close, we're supposed to meet Archibald at five."

She tilted her head in apology. "Kingsley had some questions."

Ron put the chess computer aside. "Well, what did he say?"

"He's pretty concerned," said Neville. "Mainly about the operational stuff, of course, and the stuff about me. Not that he doesn't care if Harry gets put through the wringer, but those were the main things he talked about. He knows Hugo, of course, and he knows that if Hugo says that she was making an empty threat about revealing operational stuff, then she was. But he's still very unhappy that someone like her knows any operational details. I think he was seriously considering doing a Memory Charm on her, get that out of her memory."

Ron's eyebrows went up. "Can they do that? I mean, legally?"

Neville nodded. "Aurors have a lot of license, much more than I realized when Harry and I started training with them. It's not quite the case that they can do anything they want, but it seems like it's pretty close sometimes. I think that's why they have all those character tests that you have to pass before you can join, you get given a lot of responsibility. You have to be able to not abuse it. But yes, they can do it."

"It'd be nice if they could do one to get rid of all the stuff she knows about Harry, too, while they're at it," said Pansy.

"I got the impression that he would if he could," said Hermione. "While he was focused on the operational stuff, I could tell he was really unhappy about what Harry was facing. But, of course, it's not feasible. They'd have to make her forget almost the last two years of her life, which you can't do. They could try to take out particular details, like Harry being a Legilimens, but if she spent a lot of time around while Dumbledore was teaching it to him, even that would be too much to erase."

"The other problem with that," added Neville, "is that there's no telling what she's written down. They'd have to break into her place, do a search, and even then they'd have to wonder whether she'd hidden anything away anywhere else or not. I think he's going to think about what to do, but I think he is going to do something. At one point he said, "Skeeter having that kind of information is just unacceptable."

"I'd agree with that," said Harry. "The way she is, who knows who she'd tell, for whatever reason. Even the fact that she threatened to reveal it shows she's not exactly all right."

"Kingsley said that, too," said Neville.

"What did he say about your situation, Neville?" asked Ron, referring to the possibility of it being revealed that Neville had tortured Lestrangle.

“I think he’s considering using a Memory Charm for that, too,” said Neville. “Of course, then if she has it written down, or has told another person just to be safe, then it’s twice as bad. But he did say that even if she does reveal it, I shouldn’t worry.”

“He was very nice about it,” said Hermione, her tone showing that she had very much appreciated Kingsley’s protectiveness of Neville. “He made it clear that he and the Aurors will do whatever it takes to help Neville, but he said he didn’t think it would even come to that point. He’s pretty sure that if she tried to get it printed in the Prophet, he could stop it. He said he’d talk to the people he knows at the Prophet, get them to tell him in advance if anyone writes anything that mentions the Aurors, especially if Skeeter tries to write anything.”

“But he’s not going to do that yet, right?” asked Ginny. “Does he know not to do anything until Sunday?”

“Yes, we told him about what Hugo’s going to do,” confirmed Hermione. “He thought it was a good idea, and he’ll make sure nothing he does can get back to her before then. Oh, Harry, it may interest you to know that Skeeter tried to include, in her article about you yesterday, the fact that you captured Malfoy. She wanted to be the one to break it, and its connection to the story would have been that you saved Dudley’s life, that his parents didn’t even thank you, and so forth. Evidently the person Kingsley knows at the Prophet thought it was strange that nobody knew about it, and called Kingsley to ask about it. Kingsley had a fit, he said, and he made sure any reference to that was taken out.”

“Why?” wondered Pansy.

“Because we don’t want the Death Eaters to know the circumstances of Malfoy’s capture,” explained Harry. “They think he tried to go straight to the Portkey. The reason they decided to stop after three consecutive captures was that they figure it means that the Aurors have gotten pretty skilled at super-fast Apparating. If they find out he disobeyed orders and got caught doing something

stupid, they may decide that it's worth continuing to try. They definitely would if they knew that the third capture was close to being blind luck."

"I don't know, Harry," said Ginny. "I'm not saying I know what caused it, but somehow I don't think it was just blind luck. I think that Auror was right, that the energy of love had something to do with it."

"Then why have I never managed anything like that before, during drills?" asked Harry.

"I'm not saying I know," Ginny pointed out. "It just makes sense. But maybe the reason is that in drills, it wasn't that important. Think about the other times you did something amazing using the energy of love: when you absolutely had to. Both of the shields, and don't forget that beam you used when you thought Hermione was going to be tortured. You knew it could be the third capture, it was really important, and you staked it all on your intuition. Maybe the energy of love is most effective when it's most needed. We know so little about it, who knows?"

There was silence for a few seconds. With a wry smile, Harry said, "We should do some tests, find out whether that's true or not."

The others chuckled. "Ah, the annoyances of discovering a new type of magic," said Ron. "But what Ginny said makes sense. After all, with the Cruciatus and Killing Curse shields, you can't just bring them up anytime, but only when you need them."

"Anyway, we should wrap this up, because Harry and I need to go see Dentus in a few minutes," said Hermione. "As for your particular jeopardy, Harry, he didn't have much specific advice about what could be done about that, except that he said that of course he'd do whatever he could that would be helpful to you. And he did promise not to tell anybody until Sunday, except that he wants to talk to McGonagall about it as soon as possible. I told him I'd tell her tonight while Harry and Ginny are at the restaurant, so he'll talk to her after that." She gave Harry a sad and resigned look. "One down, two to go. Ready to go, Harry?"

Her continuing sense of guilt and responsibility were obvious, especially when she looked at him. He put an arm around her and squeezed her shoulder. “It’ll be okay, Hermione.”

She gave him a smile of gratitude, but it was a sad smile. “Are you sure you can’t come up with a spell for this? Now would be when it’s most needed, after all.”

“I wish it worked that way,” he said. “Okay, let’s go.”

Hermione followed Harry through the fireplace, and they were standing in Archibald Dentus’s living room. He greeted them, and his wife came in to say hello and offer to get them something to drink, which they declined. She chatted with Harry for a minute about the Joining of Hands, expressing pleasure that her calling her husband had given Harry the idea to have it done. She then withdrew, and Dentus, Harry, and Hermione took seats.

Hermione told her story, taking about ten minutes to do so. Dentus interrupted twice to clarify points, but otherwise listened and said nothing. His eyebrows went high as Hermione finished, explaining Skeeter’s demands and threats. He thought silently for a minute, then finally said, “I must say, even for one accustomed to the bare-knuckled world of political infighting, this is pretty nasty. I suspect that that’s because when things like this are done in politics, it’s usually based on a sober appraisal of one’s best interests, a calculation which Skeeter clearly has not made. Objectively, her best interests are served by you taking the deal, but you say that Hugo says she hopes you don’t, which is not rational. Of course, revenge usually isn’t rational.”

“First of all, what kind of legal danger is Hermione in?” asked Harry. He knew that she wasn’t overly concerned about that, but he was.

“It’s not zero, but it’s very small. Legally speaking, I’d advise her not to confess what she’s done in the Prophet, because without that there’s no evidence of what she did. She exposes herself to a small amount of risk by doing this to protect you.” Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked back at him sharply, clearly communicating that she would listen to no arguments from him. Noting their

byplay, Dentus continued, “It’s a very small amount of risk, Harry. Certain aspects of the situation help her: she was only fourteen, she reaped no personal reward from her actions, she was arguably provoked, and Skeeter was doing something against the law. The fact that she’s recently performed great services for the wizarding world, is a close friend of yours, has been made Head Girl at Hogwarts, and will confess publicly to protect you are not directly relevant, but as political factors will definitely be considered. My professional opinion is that Hermione will suffer no legal consequences for what she’s done. Every factor breaks in her favor.”

Still not happy, Harry decided to press Dentus. “Archibald, if it were your daughter, would you advise her to do what Hermione’s doing?”

Hermione gave Harry an annoyed glance, but Dentus smiled at the protective impulse behind Harry’s question. “Yes, I would, Harry. Not because the legal risk is zero, but because I would want her to, and be proud of her for, taking responsibility for what she had done and protecting her friend who her actions helped put in danger, rather than thinking of herself first.” Now, Hermione raised her eyebrows at Harry in a ‘see, don’t argue with me’ way, as Harry’s face registered his unhappiness. “Sorry, Harry, I know that wasn’t the answer you were looking for. But it is right. On that, I could keep an eye on it and make sure nothing untoward happens, but really, it won’t.

“Moving on to the danger you face, Harry, what Hugo’s doing for you will be extremely helpful, much more than anything I can do. After what he’ll write, he’s correct when he says that Skeeter will never write for the Prophet again. This is where his unusual magical ability helps you greatly: if he writes it, people know it’s true, they have confidence in it. His stating as fact what she did is obviously not legal proof, but anyone who matters will be convinced. She may have friends, but anyone who’s not a true personal friend will abandon her after that. They’ll see the writing on the wall, even if she doesn’t.

“Of course she can write the book or gossip about you to anyone she wants; there’s nothing you, or I, can do about that. But Hugo is again right when he

says that she'll be thoroughly discredited. If she had the Prophet as a mouthpiece, she could definitely make your lives miserable. As it is, I think she's going to focus her energy on the book, and maybe trying to find people in the Ministry who don't like you and whisper in their ears. But she will definitely be marginalized."

"Maybe she and Umbridge will get together," said Hermione. Harry wasn't sure whether she intended to be humorous or not.

"It wouldn't surprise me, actually," said Dentus. "She might go looking for Umbridge, figuring they could help each other. For all we know, she might have been at that dinner. If she was, she knows what I helped her do to Umbridge, and would tell her about it. In fact... the more I think about it, their interests dovetail nicely. If Skeeter could damage your reputation, Harry, it would make following through on the threat to Umbridge more difficult. That would help Umbridge's comeback, and she in turn could help Skeeter from within the system. I really do wonder if they've talked already.

"Don't worry, though, it's not going to happen that way, since Skeeter's not going to manage to do anything to your reputation, Harry. Hugo's article will be the truth, and it'll put her where she deserves to be. Unless something very strange happens—and don't worry, I'll keep my eyes open—she's the one whose reputation will take a beating."

Harry nodded. He hadn't expected Dentus to do anything in particular; it was more that they needed him for advice than anything else. To Harry's surprise, Hermione had an unrelated question. "Archibald, do you have an opinion on who's going to be the next Minister of Magic?"

Dentus smiled. "Now, there's a question Harry would never ask. He's told me that you read him things from the paper to keep him informed. Tell me, do you stay informed mainly to help him, or just because you want to?"

She shrugged. "Maybe a little bit of both. I just think it's a good idea to be informed, but I know it could help him too. Of course, he has you looking out for him in this way, so maybe it's not so necessary, but I do it anyway."

“No, it’s good that you do,” Dentus assured her. “There are some things I’d have to use my time explaining to him if you hadn’t already told him, so I have more time to teach him about the whole system, what he needs to know. The more he gets exposed to this, the better.”

“Listening to you two talk like this makes me feel like... I don’t know, like I’m dumb and you’re being nice and tolerant by helping me,” said Harry. He felt mildly embarrassed, but recognized that both were trying to help him.

“Well, if you paid attention by yourself...” Hermione sounded almost apologetic, rather than condescending as she had at times in the past when saying such things. Harry wondered if it was because her ego had taken such a beating recently that she wasn’t inclined to feel superior to anyone.

“Not dumb, Harry, just not interested. You’re pretty smart, actually, I’ve discovered,” said Dentus kindly. “You just need to know more than most seventeen-year-olds do. It’s like, if you’re rich, you need to know enough not to be swindled or robbed. You have political capital, and there are things you need to know so you don’t get swindled out of it, so to speak, get taken advantage of. You do very well considering your age and your level of interest in the topic.

“As for your question, Hermione, I assume you ask because you know that the question of who the Minister of Magic is will affect Harry, important as he now is?” She nodded. “Of course you’re right, it definitely will. As you’ve probably read in the Prophet, there are a few leading candidates, but there’s one who I think has the inside track. His name is Rudolphus Bright, you may have seen his name in the Prophet.”

“Just a little,” said Hermione. “His name is one of the ones I’ve seen mentioned, but not as much as the others.”

“Yes, I’ve seen that too,” agreed Dentus, “but I think the political reporters are behind the story here. I’m sure Hugo would have him pegged as the front-runner if he did political reporting.”

“Why doesn’t he, by the way?” asked Harry.

“He did, a little, when he started out,” explained Dentus, “but it didn’t take long for politicians to realize that they shouldn’t talk to him. He picks up so much, a lot more than they want him to. As I’ve said many times, politicians lie all the time, it’s very routine. He didn’t write explicitly that they lied, but the way he wrote things made it clear if you read between the lines. Even if he didn’t write it, he easily figured out things politicians didn’t want him or anyone knowing.

“Back to Bright, he’s not written about so much because he’s not as well-known as the others. He’s younger, only forty-five, but he’s a very, very smart politician with good instincts. He was one of the few not to jump into Fudge’s camp with both feet when Fudge broke with Dumbledore over Voldemort’s return. He didn’t resign like I did, but he distanced himself from Fudge and the others, taking a short-term risk which has now paid off. Unlike Fudge, he’s quick on his feet and a good speaker, and he has the appearance of conviction and sincerity.”

“Do you mean by saying it that way that he doesn’t have true conviction and sincerity?” asked Hermione.

Dentus gave her a small smile. “No, Hermione, I’m saying that he’s so good, I can’t tell. He’s very good with people. When he talks to people, they always come away thinking, ‘Now, there’s a smart man, he thinks like I do,’ even if his opinions are somewhat different from theirs. A good way of putting it is to say that he connects with people. A lot of politicians are either good with people, or good at political infighting. He’s good at both. For example, Harry, remember that question Fudge fumbled when we met you in Albus’s office? Bright would have told you exactly what you wanted to hear. He’d have assured you that only for the very best of reasons would anything similar be done, that the Ministry takes people’s rights very seriously, and so forth. I’m not saying it wouldn’t have been the truth, just that he would have known what to say.

“And while we’re on the subject, Harry... since we haven’t talked since Fudge was killed, I want to make sure you understand something: whoever becomes the next Minister of Magic is going to want to be your friend. Even if he doesn’t

ask you to stand with him in public and say what a great person he is, your influence will be such that any association with you will be to his benefit. You obviously have to be very careful with this. Not that you should keep your distance deliberately, but do what Albus always did: be pleasant, sincere, and judge them on their actions, not their words or their personality. If you can do that, you should be all right.”

Harry nodded, and was silent as he tried to digest what Dentus said. Hermione asked, “Archibald, is it going to be a problem for you if Skeeter tells people in the Ministry that you’re helping Harry? I assume most people don’t know.”

“Yes, I’d rather people didn’t know that,” agreed Dentus. “Not for my sake—I’d be even more influential if people knew I had Harry’s confidence—but for Harry’s. People would deal with me differently if they knew, and I couldn’t give Harry as good information as I can now. I’m resigned to the idea that Skeeter will tell people, which isn’t good. I didn’t think to mention it because Harry has much bigger problems than that.”

Hermione nodded ruefully. “Yes, he does, and every time I think of that I have to stop myself from saying, ‘yes, and it’s my fault.’ I know Harry’s getting tired of that.”

“I don’t know if this will help, Hermione,” said Dentus sympathetically, “but in political terms, what you did wasn’t all that bad. In a way, it’s a lot like what I suggested be done to Umbridge.”

She made a facial expression which was the equivalent of a shrug. “I suppose it helps a little, but I have to admit that the morality of what I did bothers me much less than the effect it’s had on the people I care about. If Skeeter hadn’t been exposed, and so come after my friends and I, I wouldn’t be sitting around agonizing over the morality of what I did. I would have been relaxing and enjoying my summer.”

“We learn by our mistakes,” said Dentus. “One of the harder parts of life, I’m afraid. I know how you feel. I’ve had other people pay for my mistakes. At least

Harry has friends, people who will do whatever they can to help. I have a feeling the damage from this won't be as bad as you've feared."

"I sure hope you're right, Archibald," Hermione said earnestly. "I want to thank you, anyway. You've been a big help."

Dentus looked mildly surprised. "Not really. All I can do is give you information and advice, watch your backs a bit."

"When you're under attack like I've been, like we've been, the past few days, somebody doing that for you is important. I really appreciate it."

"Me too, obviously," agreed Harry.

Dentus inclined his head in acknowledgment. "You're quite welcome. I'm happy to do whatever I can, I just wish it could be more." Having taken in Hermione's cue that they were ready to leave, he added, "Can I persuade you to stay for dinner?"

Hermione and Harry chuckled. "Harry and Ginny are going to the Golden Dragon tonight," Hermione explained. "It'll be the first time they've really been out together for a nice evening."

"Committed for life before even going out on a date," said Dentus, grinning. "You certainly deserve it. The Aurors are keeping the details of how the Apparation crisis ended classified, as well they should, but they did let it be known to the Ministry that you were 'instrumental' in bringing it to an end. Somehow, I wasn't surprised."

Harry gave him a self-deprecating smile. "Technically, they're right, but it's not quite how it sounds. There was a fair amount of luck involved. I'll tell you about it someday, after Voldemort is defeated."

"I'll bet there'll be a lot of interesting stories you can tell after he's defeated," said Dentus. "I look forward to hearing them." He stood, as did Harry and Hermione. "Well, I'll let you be on your way, then. Have a great time, Harry, and keep your chins up, both of you." They thanked him, and went back to the Burrow.

At twenty past seven, all the residents of the Burrow and Neville were sitting in the living room talking. The main topic of conversation was Harry and Ginny's dinner, despite Harry's two attempts to steer the conversation in a different direction. As Molly told everyone about an early date of her and Arthur's, the fireplace lit up. Tonks walked out, followed by Cassandra, who Harry saw give Neville a quick smile and nod.

"You're our security?" asked Harry, surprised that the two Aurors he knew best happened to be the ones assigned to watch him. "How did it end up being you two?"

"Why, we volunteered the loudest, of course," said Tonks matter-of-factly. "Do you think we were going to miss an opportunity to look over your shoulder on your first big night out? Providing security is such a great excuse."

"Don't worry, once you go into the restaurant, you won't even see us," assured Cassandra. "Although what's ironic is that if there's a serious threat, you'll be the ones protecting us, not vice versa. We'll be just conspicuous enough that people will know you're being... well, I was going to say 'protected,' but maybe 'watched' is a better word. We're there mainly so you don't have to be looking over your shoulders all the time."

"And we appreciate it," said Ginny. "Are we ready?"

"I guess so," answered Harry. He suddenly felt nervous, and wondered what had given him the idea to do this. You're just uneasy because you're doing something you've never done before, he told himself. Just relax. Focus on love, he thought, then smiled at the idea that such a thing would be necessary.

Ginny seemed to be reading his expressions. "It'll be fine, Harry, don't worry. We'll have a good time." She then leaned into him and whispered, "You don't have to impress me. You do that all the time, just by being yourself." He smiled, and impulsively turned and kissed her.

There was light laughter, mostly from the women present. “I’d love to know what that was,” said a smiling Pansy.

“Harry can tell you sometime, if he wants,” replied Ginny. Harry knew she expected him not to because of embarrassment. They said goodbye and headed to the fireplace; Molly walked over to give each a kiss before they left. Tonks went through the fireplace first, followed by Harry, then Ginny, and finally Cassandra.

As they walked through Diagon Alley, Tonks remained several feet in front of them, and Cassandra, several feet behind. They were in their professional mode, and Harry knew he shouldn’t try to talk to them for the rest of the evening. He put an arm around Ginny as they walked, and she put one around him. “This feels strange,” he said. “I haven’t been out in public since... when was the last time?”

She thought for a few seconds. “The last Hogsmeade day, so almost three months ago.”

“Sometimes I think I should go out sometime, but as someone else,” he mused. “Have Hermione make some Polyjuice Potion, somehow find a hair or something from a random person. I could walk around and nobody would look at me, or react when they saw me. It’s been so long since that’s happened, it would be strange.”

“All we have to do for that is go somewhere in the Muggle world,” pointed out Ginny.

“That’s true,” he agreed. “But of course we can’t for now, or at least we shouldn’t. I always think of the department store. Don’t want Muggles to get caught in the crossfire.”

“I don’t know,” said Ginny, looking thoughtful. “I wonder if he’s even going to try anymore. I mean, he loses people every time he tries. With the ones he lost to the Apparation thing, I don’t think he’ll be in the mood to take chances.”

“I hope you’re right,” he said. Looking around, he added, “Funny, it’s a Friday night, lots of people around, but I haven’t been approached. Usually I would have been by now, by somebody all thrilled to meet Harry Potter.”

She gave him a sideways glance. “Harry, I understand why you feel that way, but you have to remember, it’s not just the Boy Who Lived that they’re meeting anymore, but the one who stood up to Voldemort, the one who discovered the energy of love. Maybe you didn’t deserve those reactions before, but you do now. You can’t keep acting like people are being silly by reacting that way.”

He reluctantly nodded. “I suppose so, it’s just such a reflex. It’s always been a struggle just to be polite, not to say, ‘Oh, come on, just leave me alone.’ I know it sounds really ungrateful, but...”

“I do understand, probably better than most people, just from seeing it happen to you so often,” she said. “But as for right now, I’d bet it’s because of our escorts. They’re not exactly being subtle, so people might think twice about stopping to say hello.”

“I guess that’s the bright side of being guarded,” joked Harry. Then he had another thought, and sighed. “It’s funny, I say that, and then I feel bad because I think of what Albus would do if he were in my situation. He’d smile, be truly pleased that people felt that way, chat with them for a minute, that sort of thing. I’m just uncomfortable and hope they go away as soon as possible.”

“You really shouldn’t be holding yourself up to that kind of standard,” Ginny responded, giving him a gentle squeeze with the arm around his waist. “Also, like you said, your reaction is kind of a reflex, because it did happen all the time when you hadn’t yet done anything to deserve it. I think it’s fair that you get some time to get used to it.”

“Well, I am seventeen,” he said, half-seriously. “I suppose I should be acting like an adult—”

“Now, that’d take all the fun out of life, wouldn’t it?” asked a familiar voice from behind. Harry turned to see Fred and George; he and Ginny smiled and stopped walking.

“Don’t worry, nobody will ever expect it of you two,” Ginny assured them. “I think people would be disappointed. I know I would be. So, you two just happened to be passing by?”

“Yes, indeed,” agreed George with such exaggerated enthusiasm as to make it clear that it was a joke. “We just happened to be walking in the general area which is on a line between the Diagon Alley fireplace and the Golden Dragon at just before seven-thirty, for no particular reason.” Fred nodded vigorously and innocently.

Smiling, Harry asked, “Ron told you?”

Fred and George rolled their eyes. “You mean, our brother, the Auror?” asked Fred.

“No, he’s too busy showing off his robes to pay attention to your social life,” put in George.

Ginny gave them a disapproving look. “Come on, he’s proud of getting to wear them, I don’t think anyone can blame him for that. And Harry and I are wearing them right now, why not make fun of us?”

“I’m just as happy I didn’t have to bother with dress robes,” Harry muttered.

“See, that’s it exactly,” said George. “Harry doesn’t care. And as for you, you didn’t come running into the shop the first day you could, all, ‘Look at me! Look at my robes!’” George had adopted a high-pitched, mocking tone.

“Somehow, I don’t think those were his exact words,” said Ginny.

“It couldn’t have been more clear, which you know as well as we do,” replied Fred.

Harry felt that he should stick up for Ron. “Is it so strange that he’d be proud of it? It is an accomplishment. Learning those spells isn’t easy.”

Fred shrugged. “It was just the way he was being about it. Maybe you had to be there.”

“Bet you had a good go at him,” said Ginny.

Fred and George exchanged a look of regret. “Not really,” said George.

“A little bit,” added Fred. “But Mum had told us about him and Pansy, and we had decided, in an uncharacteristic fit of generosity, that we were going to go easy on him the first few times we saw him when he was with her. Also, she was wearing them too. She wasn’t being like him, of course, but we still decided to hold back.”

“Difficult as it was,” agreed George. “No, we heard about you two from Mum, so we thought we’d come over and say hello. Since you never come ‘round the shop.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Fred cut him off. “He’s just kidding, Harry, we know you have to drag two Aurors with you wherever you go. No offense, ladies.”

“It’s more a matter of, I don’t want to have to put them out all the time,” explained Harry. “Combining that, the way I get recognized, and the fact that I have her,” he gave Ginny a squeeze, “and the rest of my friends at the Burrow, it’s easy to decide not to bother going out.”

“Well, we’d love to stay and chat, you two, but it’s almost seven-thirty, so you should be getting along,” said George. “So, have a nice time.”

“And be careful what you eat, I hear they have some strange food there,” added Fred. With a cheery wave, they walked away.

Harry chuckled and shook his head as they started walking again. “I wonder if those two are ever going to change.”

“Or, worse, what if only one of them did?” suggested Ginny. “We’re so used to them being practically the same, it would really be strange if one of them got more serious and one stayed the same. Or, if one got married and one didn’t.”

“They could find themselves a pair of twins to marry,” said Harry. “They should have dated Parvati and Padma.”

“Well, you and Ron already did that,” teased Ginny.

Harry winced slightly at the memory. “Those weren’t really dates,” he said, embarrassed. “We didn’t even want to go, I only got a date because I absolutely had to. We hardly paid attention to them after the first dance. I feel pretty stupid thinking about it now.”

Ginny shrugged. “It doesn’t seem very fair, making a fourteen-year-old boy go on a date if he doesn’t want to. You know, thinking about that... I don’t say this to make you feel bad, but I was really hoping you’d ask me. Even if it had been because you couldn’t find anyone else, I still would have been really happy.”

He felt even more embarrassed. “I’m sorry,” he said simply.

“It’s okay, I’m glad you didn’t, now,” she said, taking his hand. “You didn’t want to be there, and you wouldn’t have paid any attention to me, either. It would have been really bad for me. It’s like you said about your childhood; whatever I went through then was worth it because of what I have now.” She looked at him and smiled, managing to communicate that what she’d said last had been an understatement.

He returned her smile as they approached the restaurant. “I’m really glad you feel that way,” he said. Tonks entered the restaurant, but didn’t hold the door open for Harry and Ginny; he assumed she wanted to keep her full attention ahead of her, not looking back for a second unnecessarily. Harry pushed the ornate door open and went through first, holding it open for Ginny to enter behind him. He immediately wondered if he should have opened it and let her go first, as he had seen people do in Muggle movies, but she had no reaction suggesting he should have. I have to learn things like this, he thought.

He turned his attention to the restaurant’s greeter, who took a look at him and gaped slightly before recovering. “Hello,” said Harry uncertainly, “our reservations were made by—”

“Mr. Shackbolt, of course,” the man said smoothly. “Please come this way, Professor, ma’am.” As they moved to follow him, Harry and Ginny exchanged a look; her face registered amusement and incredulity. ‘Ma’am?’ she mouthed. Harry

grinned at her, realizing it had to be the first time she had ever been called that. He turned his head forward and followed the man. As Harry walked, he couldn't help but gawk at the chandeliers and the artwork on the walls; again, he had no experience with this sort of thing except what he had seen in the Muggle media. It struck him that it didn't look all that different than what he had seen there, except that some of the artwork depicted dragons, unicorns, hippogriffs, and other magical creatures.

They were led to a table in an alcove, mostly shielded from the view of other diners. They sat, and were given menus. "Please summon us when you are ready to order," the man said, and moved off.

Just as the man moved out of sight, Harry realized he wanted to ask a question. He turned to Ginny and asked, "How are we supposed to summon them?"

"You just tap the table with your wand," she explained. "Apparently it works this way at all nice restaurants."

"I suppose you're going to have to explain things like this to me," he said, embarrassed at his lack of understanding of such things. "I probably would have just sent my dog for them."

She laughed at the thought. "That would have worked, too. I'd almost ask you to do it, just to see what they'd say. They'd probably compliment you on how cute it is."

They opened their menus, Harry looking nervous. "Wow, they really do have lots of things. I haven't heard of half of this stuff."

"Don't pay attention to what Fred and George said, Harry," she chided him. "Of course, that should go without saying, in any situation... anyway, don't worry about it, just order what you want. You don't have to order something exotic and fancy just because we're here. Just look for something you know you like. You can always experiment when we come here some other time."

He raised his eyebrows. "Do you think we'll be coming here again?"

“I don’t see why not,” she replied as she looked at the menu. “Not so often, obviously; this place is pretty expensive. But once in a while, we could probably afford it.”

His brow furrowed as he looked at the menu. “Speaking of which, I don’t see any prices here. I thought they usually had them on menus.”

“You wave your wand over an item, and it shows the price,” she explained.

“Of course, I should have thought of that,” he chuckled. He held his wand over the lamb dish he was looking at. Suddenly a shining gold Galleon appeared on the right of the page next to the entry, with a black ‘9’ in the center of the Galleon. “Nine Galleons?” he gaped.

“Well, it is the most expensive restaurant in Diagon Alley,” she said reasonably, as she waved her wand over various menu items. “That seems to be about the average price for an entree. Obviously you shouldn’t think about the price, Harry. The whole point of coming to a restaurant like this is that you know you can afford it. That’s part of the reason you have to use your wand to see the prices, so you don’t have to think about it if you don’t want to.”

“I guess that makes sense,” he agreed. “Funny how you have to explain everything to me.”

“And I’ve never even been here before. I have been in nice restaurants, just not this one. Of course, Mum’s been here, and she told me a lot about it. She said that when she was there, when you tapped the table with your wand to summon them, they’d Apparate to your table. It was a point of pride for them to be there instantly. Of course they can’t do that these days, but I bet they still get here pretty fast. It’s just little things like that, providing the best service they can. Also, they don’t use house-elves, which some restaurants do. And all the plates, silverware, and so on are real.”

Harry was puzzled. “Real, as opposed to...”

“Conjured,” she replied, as he made an ‘oh, of course’ face. “You can’t tell the difference, which is why most restaurants conjure everything like that; it’s more convenient, because it doesn’t have to be washed, it can just be Vanished.”

“So many things about wizarding life I still don’t know,” he remarked. They were silent for a minute as both studied their menus. Having made their decisions, they put away their menus, and Harry tapped the table with his wand. A man who Harry estimated was in his late fifties, with short black hair, a round face, and a seemingly permanent smile, appeared in less than ten seconds.

“Good evening, Professor, Miss Weasley. I am Rupert Wilmington, the manager of the Golden Dragon, and I will be serving you. We are truly pleased to have you here this evening. Are you ready to order?”

“Uh, yes, thank you,” said Harry, unaccustomed to being treated with such deference. Still smiling, Wilmington took their orders, then asked, “Will you be having wine, or ale, with your meal, Professor?”

Ginny smiled as Harry’s eyebrows rose. “That’s right, you’re seventeen now, you can have that if you want,” she reminded him.

He thought about it. “I’d kind of like to,” he said to Ginny, “but the thing is, we could be called, we could have to Disapparate out of here on a second’s notice. I wouldn’t want to go into that kind of situation after drinking a glass of wine or something like that.”

“I don’t think one glass of wine or ale is going to get you drunk, especially if it’s with a meal.”

“Maybe not, but it could slow me down,” he said reluctantly. “I’ve been in enough of these situations where a second can make all the difference that I’d rather not risk it.”

“But you could be called any time,” she argued. “Are you not going to drink alcohol for the rest of your life?”

Harry sighed. “No, not for the rest of my life. Just until Voldemort is defeated.”

He saw a combination of sympathy and irritation in her face and tone. “You have to live a life, Harry. You have to do things that people do.”

“I do,” he replied. “I have you, remember? I thought I would never do that. But that was important, so I did it. Drinking alcohol isn’t important.” His expression became more serious. “Lives could depend on me. You know that. Just last week, Hermione and Neville... that just happened suddenly, nobody expected it. Something could happen again.” He looked up at Wilmington, who regarded him politely, though his smile appeared to have faded somewhat. “Just water, please.” Looking back at Ginny, he added, “After he’s defeated, I promise to come back here and have wine, ale, or whatever.”

Wilmington’s expression was now serious; Harry had the impression that it was not a face he often showed to customers. “I look forward to that day, Professor, with great anticipation. We will be very pleased to have you back.” He took Ginny’s drink order, then retreated.

Ginny looked at him sadly. She extended her hand across the table, and he took it. “I love you so much,” she said.

He nodded. “I love you too.” They looked into each other’s eyes, lost in the moment and in each other’s love. Then, looking around, he said, “What I said was right, though. I never thought I would do this.”

“You mean, eat in such a nice restaurant?” she teased him, looking around as he had been.

“That, too,” he chuckled. “No, I never thought I would let myself fall in love. I thought that would have to be one of those things that had to wait until he was gone. I had no idea how strong it was, that it couldn’t be put off. It was like, I just got swept away.”

“And I still can’t believe sometimes that I’m the one who swept you away,” she said, her face showing both her love and her wonder at what had happened.

“I, on the other hand, have no trouble believing it,” he countered. He drifted for a minute, lost in thought. Then he saw her giving him a quizzical look,

asking him without words what he was thinking. “I was just remembering my conversation with Neville and Hermione, at the end of the shift where we got the three Death Eaters,” he explained. “They had spent most of that time talking, after they had seen his grandmother in the Pensieve. They had a lot to work out.”

Ginny cut in while Harry was between sentences. “I know, she told Pansy and I a lot about it last night. We talked for, like, three or four hours, we were up pretty late, since it was the first night that all three of us slept there since this whole thing started. Anyway, she especially talked about the things she did wrong, how she wants to change. She felt so awful about what had happened. Not just bringing Skeeter down on us, but what she had done to Neville that she hadn’t realized was bad.”

He nodded. “Yes, she talked about that to me too, while he was there. I guess they figured that since I’d seen what was in the Pensieve, I knew about it anyway, so it didn’t matter. Anyway, one thing she said was that she and Neville had never really thought about what their relationship was like, because they’d never had to, they’d never had any problems big enough to need to. She said you and I had probably never had a conversation about it, and I said we hadn’t. For some reason I was just thinking about that, wondering how we would describe our relationship. I mean, if we had to analyze it, like they’ve had to.”

“Interesting question. No, we haven’t had to. It’s much more fun just to experience it,” she said with a smile. Then, turning more serious, she continued, “One of the things she said to us was about how she had all the power in the relationship, until she was afraid of losing him.” Harry nodded to indicate that she’d said that to him as well. “So, with us, you obviously had all the power. You’re Harry Potter, you’ve done amazing things. Over a hundred girls signed that scroll, you could have had nearly any girl you wanted. As for me, maybe a few boys were interested, but there was a huge imbalance, even if you wouldn’t have thought of it that way.

“Then, all of a sudden, it evened out when we had the Joining of Hands done. I don’t think you looked at it this way, but you just gave up that power, you handed me an equal share. Now, I can’t leave you, but you can’t leave me either—”

“But I was never going to,” he interrupted, “so nothing really changed. I knew I would never leave you, so I didn’t really have the power in the first place, if it was just from the idea that I could leave you more easily than you could leave me.”

She shook her head. “No, you still had it; the fact that you would have never used it doesn’t change the fact that you had it. It was like a basic fact in the situation. I couldn’t know for a fact that your feelings wouldn’t change. I worried that they would, so I was insecure, and I might have acted in ways that reflected that, even without you doing or feeling anything different. I might have given in more easily in arguments, done things to defer to you, afraid that you might stop loving me. It’s based on what was in my head, not yours. Anyway, after the Joining, it was equal. I didn’t have to worry or think about that anymore, I could feel more comfortable, be myself without fear of losing you even if I happened to upset you. It’s funny, because I think you just saw it for its value in being able to see each other in our hands and talk to each other at a distance. It changed our relationship in a really basic way, which you didn’t even realize.”

“Because from my point of view, it wasn’t really a change,” he pointed out. “So if it was a change, it was one I couldn’t see.” Now he smiled. “I’m just glad it was one that was so good for you.”

“It was really good,” she agreed, “but for both of us, in a way. If I had acted on my fears and not stood up for myself, I could have acted in ways that actually damaged our relationship, caused problems, problems that now won’t happen.

“As for the rest of our relationship... it’s hard to say, really. It’s amazing to think that we’ve only been together for four months, it seems like longer. Maybe because it’s been so intense. But I wonder if problems are the way you find out what your relationship is like, and we just don’t know yet.”

“In that case, I hope we never find out,” said Harry, half-seriously.

“We will, unfortunately,” she said. “Remember what Albus said, every relationship has problems. But whatever they are, we’ll deal with them, I’m sure of that.” Then she smiled and added, “Now, we have no choice.”

He smiled as well. “That’s all right with me.”

They stopped talking for a moment as Wilmington came to their table with their drinks, hot hand towels, a small basket of bread, some butter, an assortment of cheese, and several different types of crackers. As he walked away, Harry said, “That’s funny, I don’t remember you mentioning any cheese.”

“I think it’s like the bread, just something they bring with every meal,” she suggested. “I’m not completely sure. It’s fine with me, though. I like cheese and crackers, and we don’t get it that much at Hogwarts.” He shrugged, and they started helping themselves.

After a few bites of cheese, Harry said, “I wanted to ask you about that thing with Fred and George, before we got here. Don’t you think they were being a little...” He searched for a word, then gave up. “...not very nice, about Ron?”

She nodded. “Yes, I thought so, too. I mean, I’m sure they were right. You know how Ron can be, you remember how he was in third year, sorry, it would be your fourth year, telling that silly story about fighting the merpeople, or fifth year, he couldn’t stop talking about the last Quidditch match. He can get a bit overexcited, a little obvious about how pleased with himself he is about something. I would think most people would be tolerant of that, and be happy for Ron. But it did really seem to annoy them.”

“They couldn’t be jealous of him, could they?” wondered Harry. “I mean, they’ve never wanted to be Aurors, or do anything but what they’re doing.”

“No, I don’t think they’re jealous. If I had to guess... I’d say that they reflexively disapprove of anything Percy-ish, and maybe they’ve sometimes wondered if Ron had a bit of Percy in him. Maybe they just have a sore spot about anyone who seems to be bragging. Or, maybe it bothers them more than they’d

admit that they don't have Mum's approval, and Ron was showing off exactly the kind of thing she'd be proud of."

"Wish they'd give him a break," Harry grunted. "They don't know the half of what he's been through."

"That's true," she agreed. "Speaking of which, there's something I wanted to make sure you knew that I knew. Like I said, we talked about a lot of stuff last night, and some of it was the stuff in the letters Skeeter sent us. Hermione already knew, of course, but Pansy told me about what was in the letter Skeeter wrote Ron. She told me what happened."

Harry's eyebrows went high, which she noted. Answering his unasked question, she continued, "I think it was partly because she wanted to talk about how it affected her relationship with Ron, and she trusts me. Also, she knows it's not going to be private for very long anyway. Even if Skeeter doesn't get to write in the Prophet anymore, Pansy's sure that it'll be in the book she writes about you. I'm sure she's right."

Harry felt both sad and disgusted. "Yes, she is," he agreed. "That's exactly the kind of thing Skeeter would love. And what's worse, she'll write it so that it'll look like maybe it was something Pansy wanted to do, like she did in Ron's letter."

Ginny nodded. "Pansy said that, too. Skeeter is just so sickening, we all went on about that for a while. Anyway, Pansy said she wanted me to hear it from her, and also that it was better that I know because knowing has been a burden for you, one you couldn't talk about with me. She feels kind of bad now that she made you know, she's sure you'd rather not have known."

"That was my reaction at first, but I felt bad for having it. Maybe it is a burden, but I wasn't upset at her for telling me. If it made her feel better, then it was the least I could do. She did so much for me."

"Yes, she did. I was extremely grateful to her for doing it, of course, and I told her that. If it wasn't for her, you wouldn't be here right now, and my life would be infinitely worse. But I can really understand why she didn't want to tell Ron, to

burden him with that. She said... I don't think she'll mind that I tell you this, but it's probably better if you don't mention it to Ron... she said that she was in kind of a hurry to do that sort of thing with Ron once they got together, and he was a bit surprised, that she was being so forward. Not that he was reluctant, she said."

"I can imagine," he said, smiling a little. "I assume she did it because she wanted to have a memory of that kind of thing which was actually pleasant."

"Yes, exactly. Let me ask you, you had to be the one to tell him, since she wasn't there when we got the letters. How did he take it?"

"Better than I expected," he said. "He wasn't mad at her, he just wondered why she didn't tell him. I think he kind of knew, though. I hadn't thought of it this way before, but the fact that he wasn't mad at her is kind of a compliment to me, that he wouldn't question her reason for doing it. He must have seen it as something she had no choice about."

"She didn't, of course," said Ginny. "Hermione and I would have done it too, we both told her. Awful as it was, there just wasn't any real choice. And the idea of how Skeeter's going to write about it... it's like, I feel bad for everyone these days. For Pansy, for that... for Neville, for all he had to go through, both from her and from the Death Eaters... for you, for what will happen... and for Hermione, for just everything. This weighs on her so much. I don't think ten minutes goes by these days when she doesn't think about it. And the worst thing is, it's not going away. I mean, thanks to your getting that hair from Skeeter, she can't listen in anymore, but for as long as she lives, there'll be someone out there who won't pass up an opportunity to hurt Hermione or the rest of us, to make her or us look bad. No wonder Hermione wishes she were dead."

Concerned, he asked, "Do you think she really does? I mean, she said that thing about stepping on her, but I figured that was just because she was angry..."

She looked at him sadly. "Harry, Hermione's in a constant state of anger, of embarrassment, of frustration, right now. There's just a huge amount of emotional pressure on her. I think I could barely function if I was her. But yes, she does mean

it. I know it's not good, she knows it's not good, she just can't help it. It's how she feels." She paused for a few seconds, thinking. "Right now, as we speak, she's sitting with McGonagall, telling her the story of what happened. She's told it twice already, and this'll be the hardest one. You know how she feels about McGonagall. Imagine if you'd had to tell a story like this about yourself to Albus, while he was still alive."

Harry could imagine it. "I just hope McGonagall will be as compassionate and understanding as he would have been."

"That's asking a lot of anybody," pointed out Ginny, "but I know what you mean. Yes, I hope she is, too."

They were silent for a few minutes, lost in their thoughts, eating the last of the cheese. Then Harry asked, "Did you ever get your O.W.L. results? I thought they usually came by the end of July."

"The O.W.L.s were delayed," she reminded him. He nodded somberly, remembering the reason, and the memories it stirred. "So, the results would be, too. But yes, it should be any day now."

They stopped talking as their food arrived. They talked only sporadically as they ate, discussing routine topics such as Hogwarts, Harry's schedule, and the fact that Harry would likely take only five N.E.W.T. exams. He joked that if he became the headmaster in the future, he would probably hold the record not only as the youngest headmaster, but also the one with the fewest N.E.W.T.s. She pointed out that if he remained until he was the same age as Dumbledore, it would be offset by another record, for the longest tenure as both headmaster and staff member.

After they finished, Wilmington came by and cleared away the dishes, then asked if they wanted any dessert. Both were full, but wanted to try something, so they settled on splitting one. Asked if they wanted coffee, they both decided to give it a try, never having had it before.

They ate their dessert slowly and talked. After they finished, she took his hand. Smiling, she asked, "Do you think we'll remember this night when we're old people?"

He chuckled. “If I don’t, it’ll mean that I’ve lost my memory, because it’s definitely memorable. It’s strange to think about being old, I’m barely used to being an adult.”

“You should grow a beard, so you can look like Albus when you get to be that age,” she joked.

“I don’t know... I don’t see myself as the type to have a beard, for some reason.”

“I’m sure you’ll be handsome whether you do or not,” she assured him. “So tell me, when do you think we should get married?”

He reacted with surprise. “What made you think of that?”

She shrugged. “Thinking about us being old people, somehow that made me think of how many years we’d have been married at that point. Also, if tonight’s memorable, then we should discuss something that’ll be memorable.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I haven’t even asked you yet. I thought I’d, you know, get a ring, maybe get down on one knee like they do in the Muggle movies, that sort of thing.”

“Hmmm, that sounds nice,” she grinned. “But you don’t really need to ask me to marry you, you know. You’ve already done that.” To his slightly surprised look, she continued, “You did it when you said, ‘I want us to get the Joining of Hands done.’ That was your marriage proposal, even if you didn’t realize it.”

He smiled. “I guess so. Maybe I would have phrased it differently if I’d known. The way I said it doesn’t sound very... I don’t know, memorable.”

She gripped his hand tightly. “Harry, you don’t have to get down on one knee, or use a memorable phrase to make me happy. Like I said before, just be yourself. That’s all I’ll ever want from you.”

Slightly embarrassed but very happy, he said, “I think I can do that.” He paused, then added, “But I’ll also try to remember to Vanish the furniture I conjure.”

She smiled broadly. “That’d be good, too.”

He felt a sudden impulse to kiss her, but she was across the table, and he felt awkward about moving enough to do it. He settled for giving her a loving look, which she returned.

Wilmington approached their table, holding a folder. Harry wondered if it was the bill, though it seemed too large to be that. “Professor Potter, Miss Weasley... The Golden Dragon has been in operation for over a century. There is a tradition which we have had for quite a long time, and we try to continue whenever possible. Normally, we do this only for married couples, but since you have already had the Joining done, we feel it safe to make an exception in your case.”

He opened the folder, and handed Harry what at first he thought was a piece of paper. As Wilmington handed one to Ginny as well, Harry realized that it was a photo—a photo of his parents sitting at what was obviously a table at the Golden Dragon. As was usual in wizard photographs, the figures were smiling, moving, and occasionally waved at the camera. Harry saw his father at one point pat his stomach, obviously to indicate that he felt very full. He saw his mother laugh. He felt emotion rise up, and he looked up at Wilmington. “Thank you very much.”

Wilmington’s normal smile was gone; he looked sincerely pleased at Harry’s reaction. “We had been hoping to see you here,” he said gently. Harry nodded his appreciation, and looked at Ginny’s picture of Arthur and Molly as she looked at his. She again took his hand, knowing what he was feeling.

“And now,” said Wilmington, “if you would be so kind, we would very much like to take a photograph of you, for... well, who knows?”

Ginny beamed. “We haven’t thought of names yet, but we’d be very happy to.” She and Harry moved closer to each other as another man came in, holding a camera. Suddenly, to Harry’s great surprise, Fawkes burst into view a few feet above Wilmington’s head, no doubt in full view of all the customers. He fluttered down and landed on Harry’s shoulder.

Ginny looked at him in surprise. “Did he decide to do that, or did you ask him to?”

“I think he did,” Harry replied, “but sometimes it’s hard to tell. Maybe I would have wanted him in the picture, but I just hadn’t thought of it. You know how it is, a lot of times he knows things I think before I do.”

“Phoenixes are most impressive,” commented Wilmington, “as are those with whom they bond.” He gave a small smile and slight shrug of apology in response to Harry’s embarrassed look.

Ginny smiled at Harry in a teasing way. “I’d definitely agree with that.” He smiled back, and they faced the camera, hands held on top of the table. The man with the camera took a picture, then another. He thanked them, then withdrew. Harry leaned over and kissed Ginny. “You know, that kiss may show up in the picture,” she said.

“By the time our children are old enough to see that picture, they’ll have seen us do that a lot,” he predicted. “They’ll just say, ‘that’s Mum and Dad, even back then, they were always doing that.’”

“I see you plan on setting a good example for our children,” she said happily.

“A very good one,” he agreed. “Thank you, again,” he said to Wilmington, as he and Ginny stood to leave.

“We are most pleased to have had you here,” Wilmington assured them. “And as to the matter of the bill, Mr. Shackbolt, when he made the reservation, requested that it be sent to the Aurors. Thank you for coming. We hope you have enjoyed your evening.”

“Very much, thank you,” said Harry, as Ginny nodded in agreement. Wilmington shook hands with both of them, and they made their way to the exit. With Fawkes on his shoulder, Harry was aware of the eyes on him that he hadn’t noticed when he had come in. As he stepped out into the cool evening air, a hand in Ginny’s, he held up the photo for another look.

At nine-thirty, Harry stepped out of the Burrow's fireplace right behind Ginny to see everyone in the living room. They were greeted with smiles, as Pansy said, "Well, come on, we want to hear all about it." Harry looked for an empty chair, but before he could find one, the fireplace lit up again. To everyone's surprise, Kingsley stepped out.

"Hello, Kingsley," said Arthur, who then noticed Kingsley's expression, which was serious and grim. "What's going on? Did something happen, something about their dinner?"

"Something happened, but it was nothing to do with their dinner," answered Kingsley. "I have some... important news, something that happened while Harry and Ginny were at dinner. About an hour and a half ago Rita Skeeter was killed, at her home."

Harry was stunned, speechless; a look around showed that others were as well, especially Hermione. He had never seen her look so surprised.

"How?" asked Arthur.

"Whoever it was used the Killing Curse, then escaped by Disapparating and then taking a Portkey, in the same way that was done by the one who killed Fudge," said Kingsley. "And... there's another similarity to Fudge's murder: it appears that this killer used Polyjuice Potion as well."

Kingsley looked at Harry sympathetically; Harry felt a chill go down his spine without being sure why. "At seven forty-five, fifteen minutes after Harry and Ginny sat down to dinner, three witnesses saw someone approach, then enter, Skeeter's apartment. When later interviewed, they all said that who they saw was Harry. Whoever killed Skeeter assumed Harry's appearance before doing it."

Harry's mouth hung open. Even though he knew that he had not done it, he felt an irrational stab of guilt at the thought that someone who looked exactly like him had. "Why would they do that?" he asked, dumbfounded.

Solemnly, Kingsley replied, "I think there are going to be a lot of questions about this that we don't know the answers to, and many of them will begin with the

word ‘why.’ Now, there’s something we should all talk about, but before we do, I’m waiting for someone else to arrive. I sent a request for Hugo Brantell to come here; he should be here any time.”

“Why did you call him?” asked Neville.

Kingsley looked around the room, meeting everyone’s eyes. “Because this is kind of an uncomfortable situation for all of us, and there’s a cloud looming that I’d like to get rid of as soon as possible. I’m sure it’s occurred to all of us that Skeeter’s death is rather... convenient for everyone here. The plain and simple fact is that the most logical suspects are in this room, and that includes me. Neville, Hermione, you remember that this afternoon, I said, ‘Skeeter knowing this is unacceptable,’ and three hours later she turns up dead. Now, I know that I didn’t do it or have it done, and I don’t think for a second that any of you did either. But before we proceed any further, I’d like us all to be comfortable with the idea that nobody wonders if anyone else had anything to do with it. Hugo can help us do that.”

Harry looked at his friends, and he could tell they felt the same way as he did. “Kingsley, we trust each other, and we trust you. It’s not necessary—”

“I know that, Harry, this is just for the sake of certainty,” responded Kingsley. “And besides, how do you know it’s not me? I’m the likeliest suspect, after all. I—”

“No, you’re not,” said Hermione quietly, still looking stunned.

Kingsley shook his head. “You’re number two, Hermione, you’re less likely than me. You were with McGonagall when it happened, and somehow I don’t think you have connections to hit wizards. You have lots of motive, but no opportunity. I, on the other hand, happened to be alone at the time. I have an excellent motive, and I have opportunity. I’ve killed before, it’s something I can do if I have to. I could have snuck up behind Harry when he was on ready status during a shift and snipped a few hairs, he never would have known. Not only that, I could recite chapter and verse on why killing Skeeter was an excellent idea, one that I could entirely justify.

She knew too many things, she could have endangered the whole anti-Voldemort movement. My moral qualms about killing wouldn't have stopped me if I thought it was really necessary.

"Now, it just so happens that I didn't, but I would be more comfortable if you all were certain of that. Having Hugo do this can stop even the stray thought from occurring to any of us, so—" He cut himself off as the fireplace lit up and Hugo stepped out.

He turned to Kingsley. "What's happened?"

Kingsley told him, then explained what he wanted from Hugo. Hugo's discomfort was plain. "Kingsley, I really don't like to use my talent this way. I'm not an investigator, and—"

"I'm not asking you to be one," Kingsley assured him. "As I said, this is just so we can all eliminate the thought. This is totally unofficial. Take in everyone here, and if anyone doesn't like the idea, then don't do it, you don't have to say who it is."

"I wouldn't anyway," responded Hugo. He surveyed the room for a few seconds, then sighed. "Nobody minds. Nobody thinks it'll change much; everyone's comfortable with the idea that nobody in the room knows anything."

"Okay," said Kingsley. "What questions do you need to ask?"

Hugo chuckled. "I don't need to ask. Everyone here is shocked, surprised, confused. If anyone knew anything that by telling would shed any light, it would appear to me like a brilliant beacon. Nobody here did it, nobody told anyone they weren't supposed to tell, nobody has the first idea who did it."

"Okay, Hugo, thanks. But I wonder, would you be willing to stay around for a few minutes? You're pretty clever, I'd like to know what you think."

Hugo looked impatient. "Remember, this is strictly unofficial, but all right. But first, you ought to check me, too. I was one of the ones who knew."

"We can't check you," Kingsley pointed out.

"Harry can," said Hugo.

"Hugo—" started Harry, but he was quickly cut off.

“I know, Harry, you’d rather not. See, this is how I felt. But do it anyway, I’d like Kingsley to know for sure. This is important to him, he’d really like to know who did this.”

Kingsley grunted. “So I can give them a kiss on the cheek.”

“Okay, but I’ve never checked for lies before, just found memories,” Harry said.

“It’s not that different,” said Hugo. “Just ask a question, and focus on the answer. If the person lies, you should get a glimpse of a memory that contradicts the lie. Try it with me, ask me some simple questions.”

Harry nodded. “What color socks are you wearing?”

Hugo smiled. “Dark blue.”

“Right. What did you eat for dinner?”

“Spaghetti.”

“Hmmm... I’m getting an image of chicken, I think. Is that right?”

“Yes, very good,” said Hugo. “Now ask a few conceptual questions, ones not associated with visual images.”

Harry thought for a minute. “Do you like being a journalist?”

“Yes, I do.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-seven.”

“I think that’s a lie,” said Harry. “It feels like you’re remembering how old you are, but I didn’t catch the number.”

Hugo nodded. “As you get better at it, you will. But that should be enough for now. Go ahead and ask me the questions about this.”

Harry took a deep breath, unhappy to be doing it. “Did you tell anyone about the situation with Hermione, or Skeeter’s threats against us?”

“No,” replied Hugo.

“Do you have any information which, if we knew, would help us figure out who did it?”

“No.”

Harry nodded. “That should be enough, right?”

“Yes, Harry, thank you,” said Kingsley. “Now, the next question is, who outside of this room knew about Skeeter’s blackmail threat?”

“Only one person, Archibald Dentus,” said Harry. To Kingsley’s raised eyebrows, Harry added, “He’s been a friend since the ARA passed, helping me with political stuff. But it couldn’t have been him anyway, because of the Polyjuice Potion. Whoever did it needed a bit of me, and he’s never had the opportunity to get that. Even if he told someone, they couldn’t have impersonated me. Also, he only found out three hours before it happened, which would be hardly enough time to do anything.”

“Okay, let’s look at that part more closely,” suggested Kingsley. “Aside from someone sneaking up on you and clipping hair, which is impossible for you to know, who could have had access to enough of you to make Polyjuice Potion?”

After a few seconds of silence, Harry had a sudden thought. “Voldemort... the night he came back. He had Wormtail take some of my blood to use in the cauldron, to bring him back.”

“But he used it all, didn’t he?” asked Ginny.

“There would still have been some blood left in the vial,” Harry pointed out. “Would it have been enough to make Polyjuice Potion? Hermione?”

Looking distracted, Hermione returned her attention to the conversation. “Hmmm? Oh, yes, I think it would have been enough. All you need is a tiny bit.”

“Would he have really kept the vial, though?” wondered Ron.

“It doesn’t seem likely, but you never know,” said Kingsley. “The fact is, the idea that the killer is a Death Eater is our default hypothesis, since it was done in the same way as it was with Fudge. You can construct a reasonable narrative around it: you can say they impersonated Harry because she had just written an article about him, a largely favorable one, and she would’ve let him into her apartment. Even if they didn’t know about your group’s situation with Skeeter, which they

wouldn't, it's still a reasonable device to get near her. It all works, except for motive."

"They could have wanted to implicate Harry," suggested Hugo. "That could be the primary reason for choosing him to impersonate. Of course, it doesn't work, because he can just take Veritaserum and he's off the hook. It could damage his reputation a bit, just the appearance of it... could that be worth it enough to them to bother?"

"They wouldn't even have to give me Veritaserum," Harry pointed out. "At least a couple dozen people saw me at the restaurant."

"That could have been an impostor, for all they know," said Kingsley.

Harry shook his head. "Fawkes showed up near the end of the meal. That's pretty good proof that it was me." A thought occurred to him. "You don't suppose that's why he showed up, do you?" he asked nobody in particular. "He somehow knew I had to be positively identified?"

Harry expected Hermione to answer, but Hugo did instead. "We do know that phoenixes often do things that turn out to be a good idea, even though they couldn't really have known at the time. It seems possible."

"Mentioning the restaurant brings up an interesting point," said Kingsley. "Harry hardly ever goes out in public these days, partly because he doesn't want to inconvenience us. Which I've been meaning to have a chat with him about," he added, giving Harry a stern but affectionate glance. "You really should get out more, it's good for you to be seen in public. It emphasizes the idea that you're defying Voldemort. Anyway, the timing is pretty amazing: it happens just as Harry goes out for the first time in months. Either it was Death Eaters trying to implicate him, and they got really unlucky, or it was someone friendly trying to make sure he wasn't implicated. This brings us back to the idea that it was an Auror, or an Order member. But any competent Auror—and they all are—wouldn't have to impersonate Harry to get close to Skeeter; we're trained in how to infiltrate a home or building unseen by means other than Apparation. An ordinary apartment like Skeeter's

would have been child's play for an Auror to get into. And the problem with it being a non-Auror Order member—like McGonagall, Snape, Lupin, and so on—is that they have no motive, since they didn't know that Skeeter was threatening to compromise classified information.”

He paused, and there was silence for a minute. “It all keeps coming back to this,” concluded Kingsley. “If it's not Death Eaters, the only people with motive are the ones who knew about Skeeter's blackmail threats. And those—”

He stopped talking as a face suddenly appeared in the fireplace; Harry looked over to see Dentus looking back at him, and everyone else. “Excuse me for intruding,” he said, clearly surprised to see so many people. “I was calling for Harry, but it's not hard to guess what's going on. I just now heard what happened. Kingsley, Hugo, I gather you're the only people besides myself who knew about Skeeter?” They nodded. “Harry, the main reason I called was that I wanted to assure you that I told no one about our discussion, not even my wife. I knew you wouldn't think it anyway, but I wanted to tell you personally. I imagine that you're all trying to work it out, and not having much success?”

“No, we're not,” agreed Harry. “And you're right, I didn't think you did, but I appreciate your calling to tell me that. We were just getting around to the idea that whoever did it didn't know about Skeeter's blackmail, even though it seems kind of unlikely.”

“Indeed,” said Dentus. “Very peculiar. Well, I'll let you get back to it, then. I'm not a very likely source of information for something like this, but I'll let you know if I hear anything. I'll be in touch.” Dentus's head vanished from the fireplace.

Kingsley looked at Hugo. “I suppose you wouldn't tell me if I asked.”

“No, I wouldn't,” confirmed Hugo. “He didn't give his permission. But you're a smart man, Kingsley, you don't need me to tell you everything.” Not understanding what they were talking about at first, Harry realized that Kingsley wanted Hugo to confirm Dentus's truthfulness, and Hugo didn't want to.

“I suppose not,” Kingsley conceded. “Well, strange as it seems, the notion that Death Eaters did this has to be considered the most likely hypothesis, barring any new information. I’m heading back to headquarters, see if anything comes up in the search of her place, any kind of evidence. I doubt there will be, though.” He said goodbye and left, followed soon by Hugo. Harry was alone with his friends, and Arthur and Molly.

Molly stood, followed by Arthur. “Well,” said Arthur, “I guess this is one of those times when life is like a centaur. We’re going to bed. Good night, all.”

“Don’t stay up too late,” added Molly as she followed Arthur up the stairs, and the six were alone.

Harry looked at Hermione, who seemed to be staring at nothing in particular. “What does that mean, ‘life is like a centaur?’”

Hermione continued staring, giving no indication that she heard Harry. He was about to try to get her attention when Pansy answered. “It’s a phrase based on the idea that you can never get a straight answer out of a centaur, they’re very mysterious and secretive. It kind of means, life has mysteries, sometimes you have no idea what’s going on. It does seem true now.”

Harry couldn’t help but agree. There was silence for a minute, as everyone digested what had happened. He turned to Ginny and hesitantly said, “You know what this kind of reminds me of...”

“Percy,” she said, and he nodded. “Yes, it’s a very different situation, but I see the similarity. It’s in the idea that we don’t feel how we’re ‘supposed’ to feel. In that situation, we were supposed to feel sad for ourselves, but we didn’t, we just felt sad for Mum and Dad. Here, we’re supposed to feel sad just on principle, even if only a little, but instead, we feel... well, not happy exactly, but...”

“Like she got what she deserved,” put in Ron. “And relieved, that we don’t have to go through what we thought we were going to have to. But, like with Percy, that isn’t the ‘acceptable’ feeling, so we feel like we’re... kind of stuck, somehow.”

Pansy ran a hand over Ron's shoulders and upper back. "Like I said in the notebook to you that night, we feel what we feel. Considering what we've been through with her, I don't think anyone would blame us for not being sorry that she died."

Ginny took Harry's hand. "How do you feel?"

His first thought was that he wasn't sure he knew. "Confused, I think. Like I'm in a fog, or something. I guess what Ron said makes sense. This thing that was hanging over me isn't anymore, and I'm happy about that, just not happy about the way it happened. What really disturbs me is the idea that somebody friendly did this to protect me. In a way, I find myself hoping it was Death Eaters. Also because then I don't have to think about how someone got a hair from me, or whatever."

"If somebody friendly did it, I don't think the reason would necessarily be to protect you," suggested Neville. "The fact that she knew stuff she shouldn't have was a far better reason. But I see what you mean. While all that was going on, I had this thought, like, what if it was retaliation for the letters? What if, for example, Cassandra was really mad at Skeeter for how the letters affected me, and... not that I thought she would actually do it, and then I remembered that she and Tonks were protecting Harry at the restaurant, so it couldn't have been her anyway. But I could definitely understand why you feel that way, Harry. I really didn't like the idea when I thought of it." Neville looked at Hermione, who again seemed to be staring off into space. He touched her cheek; slightly startled, she looked at him. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded slowly. "I feel like Harry said he felt, maybe even more so. Maybe it's a very thick fog. It's just... such a shock..."

Looking around at the others, Harry thought they were thinking the same thing as him—that this would have a stronger impact on Hermione than any of them. He had been in the most danger, but it was she who had carried by far the greatest emotional burden. Now Skeeter was dead, something for which Hermione had actively wished. He wondered if she felt responsible, and he felt like he wanted

to say something to her to assure her she wasn't, but he was afraid that if she wasn't thinking that, then his saying it would just cause her to do so.

They stayed downstairs for another half hour, talking in subdued tones, mostly covering ground already explored during the conversation with Kingsley and Hugo. Hermione said very little; Harry, only a bit more. Then they went upstairs, including Neville, who had moved his things over from his Auror guest room while Harry had been at the restaurant.

The boys wordlessly changed into their nightclothes and got into their beds. Harry lay in the silence for five minutes, his mind drifting. He thought about asking Fawkes to sing, but he didn't feel it was quite necessary. Then he had another thought, and made a request of Fawkes. Within a few seconds, he could faintly hear phoenix song coming from the girls' bedroom.

He felt his hand tingle, and rolled over in his bed so that his back was to Ron and Neville. He held up his left hand and looked into his palm. "That was very thoughtful of you," said Ginny. "I'm sure she appreciates it."

"It's just... hard to imagine what she's going through right now," he said, whispering so softly he could barely hear himself, but knowing she would hear it.

"I know what you mean," she agreed. "Our bedroom door is just open a crack, I think yours is too... why don't we open them completely, you three will be able to hear him better down the hall."

He agreed, got up, and walked to the door. Opening it all the way, he looked out into the hall and saw Ginny doing the same thing. On making eye contact, they immediately walked toward each other and kissed, with an unusual energy and urgency. He wasn't even sure why; he fleetingly wondered if it was a feeling of needing each other more in an emotionally charged situation. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too," she replied, the feeling as clear in her eyes as from her words. They kissed again, then went back to their rooms. Harry lay down and

started his Occlumency exercises, phoenix song clearly audible through the open bedroom doors.