

DISCLAIMER: This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

CHAPTER 7

THE MEMORY CHARM

It was a beautiful, warm spring day, as it always was at the phoenix place in the middle of the night. Seeing Dumbledore standing a few feet away, Harry walked over and embraced him. “It’s days like the one I just had that make me especially glad that I can see you like this,” he said, then let go of Dumbledore.

“It has been a very trying day, a very trying week, for that matter,” agreed Dumbledore. They sat down on the grass.

“Do you know who killed Skeeter?” asked Harry.

“Yes, I do, but it should not surprise you to learn that that is something I cannot tell you,” said Dumbledore, in a tone suggesting he understood that Harry would not be happy with his answer. “You would like to know why. The short answer, to borrow a phrase, is ‘that would be cheating.’ The longer answer is that it would be a misuse of the connection we have. There are many things about the current physical situation that I could tell you which you would find useful and interesting, but to do so would be to deprive you of part of the normal experience of physical existence—to not know things, to have to find out for oneself. I tell you things here, but they are spiritual and philosophical ideas, not facts about physical existence. If I told you such things as you asked, it would change the experience of your life in a way that would make it less spiritually fulfilling. I understand that that is difficult for you to see at the moment, but I assure you that it is true. It is irregular enough that I do what I do. As it is, I have changed your experience in one significant way: it will no longer be necessary for you to wonder about spirituality or post-death existence; those answers have already been given to you by me. I accept

that because it, and talking to you, are decisions I made when I was physical. I should not go beyond what I planned to do when I went through the Veil.”

Harry knew his disappointment would be clear to Dumbledore, even though he said nothing about it. “Well, like a lot of things you say about this sort of thing, I don’t totally understand it, but I sort of do. I think the part I understood best was when you said, ‘that would be cheating.’ You’ve said before that life is kind of a big game, right?”

“That is a broad oversimplification, of course, but correct in concept,” acknowledged Dumbledore. “It is a very important game, if you will, and one so absorbing and distracting that one is unaware of the fact that it is a game. It is not a game in the sense of a game being frivolous, or in the sense of being strictly for enjoyment. As I have said, our true nature is spiritual, and the most ‘real’ reality is the one I will reach when I move on from here, the spiritual realm. Consider the experience of reading a book, a particularly absorbing piece of fiction. There are times during which you become so absorbed that you temporarily forget it is a book; you imagine that it is real, a reality you are observing and perhaps feeling a part of. This is very roughly analogous to your whole physical existence as compared to your spiritual existence; your physical existence is like a very absorbing book in which from the first page to the last you do not recall that you are reading a book. For me to tell you things such as you asked would be like telling you how a book will end, or revealing major aspects of the plot in advance. The experience would be diminished.”

“And so,” said Harry, struggling to follow Dumbledore’s point, “as it is, by talking to me like this, you’re reminding me that I’m just reading a book, which I wouldn’t have recognized otherwise.”

“Yes, quite so, though I would not use the word ‘just.’ Physical existence is very important; without it, we would have no way of recognizing the true grandeur of our spiritual selves. One must ‘not have’ something before one can truly

appreciate having it. Also, as I have said, we learn in physical existence things we could not learn in the spiritual realm.”

Harry attempted to piece the idea together with things Dumbledore had said in previous nights. “So, is that the reason that when we’re... physical, that we don’t see the spiritual realm? It would be cheating?”

Dumbledore shrugged lightly. “Not cheating, exactly, but the experience would not be the same if we knew. You are familiar with the phrase ‘the stakes are life and death.’ The stakes of existence, as it were, would not be so high if it was commonly known and accepted that the spirit is eternal; it is part of what makes life interesting and challenging. The fact is that spiritual information is available in the physical realm, however; it is simply difficult to access, and very few do. The mystics with whom I consulted before I passed through the Veil understand such things; to them it is as clear as is physical reality. But they have devoted significant portions of their lives to understanding such things; most people do not. There will come a time—perhaps in the near future, perhaps in the distant future—when people know this as a matter of course, when children are raised to intuitively understand the spiritual realm and taught how to connect with it in their conscious awareness. That is part of the overall challenge for the human species, part of our society’s evolution. I understand that this does not concern you right now, but it is part of the ‘big picture’ that may help you understand my answer to your question.”

Harry chuckled. “I’ve almost forgotten my question now, but I think I understand your point. I guess we’re learning things, and that’s one of the things we learn, we just haven’t gotten to it yet.”

“I see you are thinking of it as if it were part of a school curriculum,” remarked Dumbledore, amused. “It is much less structured, of course, though the analogy is roughly correct. But let us return to the day’s events, as I know you still have questions, and there is only so much time we should take each night.”

Harry reluctantly nodded. “As you probably know, we were having a hard time last night because I think there’s a part of each of us that was happy that

Skeeter died. Or, happy for the result, I guess. If the result could have been gotten without her dying, I'm sure we'd all have preferred that. But I don't want to feel this way, I don't want to be even a little happy that she died. Is there some way that I, or we, can not feel this way?"

"Pansy was right, Harry. We feel what we feel. We can change how we feel about things, but it usually takes time, and understanding. To change how you feel about Rita's death, you must understand why you felt that way. For the most part, you do; you are happy not to have to face the trials you would have faced, and her death was the only way for those trials not to occur. But you already understand that it is not the fact of her death per se that pleases you; in your guilt, you fail to differentiate between being pleased at her death, and pleased at the result of her death. You feel guilty because you find any satisfaction at all with the results of her death, even though it is very understandable that you do so. Had she been killed along with Cornelius, as was intended, you would not have felt happy in the least. You know what kind of person you are, and that you take no satisfaction from another's death."

"I suppose that makes sense," Harry agreed. "I do understand that I'm happy with the result, not her death exactly. But when I say 'us,' I suppose I'm mainly thinking of Hermione. I'm concerned about her. I remember what you said about Ron wishing Umbridge was dead, but... in this case, Hermione wished Skeeter was dead, and she actually died. I'm worried that Hermione might feel responsible somehow."

"It is understandable that she would," said Dumbledore. "In the strictest sense, she is not, as she did not kill Rita herself, or commission her killing. She is responsible only for her own thoughts and actions. She avidly wished Rita dead, and for that, she does bear responsibility."

"Maybe, but she was pushed so hard emotionally that you could say that she was barely in her right mind," Harry argued. "That's not the way she usually is, and I would never blame her for that."

“It is not a question of blame, or of fault. My intent is not to judge Hermione’s actions or thoughts; my saying that she bears responsibility for her thoughts and actions was a statement of fact. No one else can judge us; it is only we who can truly judge ourselves.”

“I remember when this topic came up, about Ron and Umbridge, you said...” Harry paused, trying to remember Dumbledore’s exact words, “‘The line between wishing someone dead and actually killing them is far thinner than most people would like to believe.’ Can you explain what you meant by that, how that works?”

“Our thoughts are highly creative, far more so than is commonly understood in the physical realm,” said Dumbledore. “In the spiritual realm, our thoughts are instantly creative: if you think of something, it appears. In this in-between realm which I inhabit, it is a similar situation: this place seems real to you, and in a way it is—you can pick flowers, you can feel the sunlight—but we are creating it, you and I, with our thoughts. Our dreams are no less valid or real than our waking existence, and they are created totally from thoughts. Even in the physical realm, there is magic, which is simply a way of making our thoughts physically manifest. You may recall that in the first lecture I gave to your class last year, I emphasized the primacy of thoughts over words in performing magic; these are all variations on a theme.

“The ‘bottom line,’ if you will, is that in the physical realm, our thoughts are essentially creating our reality; this is a collective endeavor. This is not something I can explain fully right now, as it would take quite a long time, and is not truly necessary. For now, you may take my word for it if you wish. This does not happen at a conscious level, in the sense that things do not appear or occur instantly just because we think them. At the physical level, it takes some time, if one is not using magic.”

Harry took a minute to digest what Dumbledore had said. It didn’t sound right, but as usual, he was inclined to take it seriously if only because Dumbledore

said it. He decided to operate on the assumption that what Dumbledore said was true. “So, if Hermione hadn’t wanted Skeeter dead, would Skeeter not have died?”

“We cannot say for certain, since in this case that is not what happened, though I do believe that it is almost certain that she would have died anyway. Each situation is different. Ron at one point wished Dolores Umbridge dead, but she is still alive. Wishing for it does not make it directly happen, but it contributes to the environment, in a sense. As greater numbers of people desire and focus on an event, the chances of it happening increase. With her actions, Rita herself contributed greatly to the atmosphere in which her death took place. She deliberately inflicted emotional wounds on all of you, especially Hermione and Neville, and she threatened actions which could have contributed to the destruction of the wizarding community. She has substantial culpability in the events that occurred, far more than does Hermione.”

“Yes, but Hermione might say, ‘But she only did that because I made her stop writing. If I hadn’t done that, none of this would have happened,’” pointed out Harry.

Dumbledore shook his head. “Hermione did not make Rita do what she did. We may feel that we are provoked into actions, but we choose them. We cannot blame anyone else for our thoughts or actions. Of course, what Hermione did affected Rita’s life substantially, but Rita could have done a number of things, all far more constructive than what she did. We may understand the reasons she sought revenge, but she is still ultimately responsible for her actions. One of the great Muggle prophets advocated ‘turning the other cheek,’ and this is why. If we do not, we may be drawn into cycles of harm, pain, and retaliation. Hermione already realizes that she stopped Rita from writing out of revenge, to harm her as Hermione herself felt harmed. She is in the process of recognizing the full consequences of wishing Rita’s death as she did, and entertaining the notion of causing it directly. As she indicated at one point, there were times at which if she had seen a beetle, she might well have stepped on it, not knowing for certain

whether it was Rita. She could not seriously entertain killing Rita as a human, but killing a 'bug' was sufficiently different to her that she could perhaps have done it. Obviously she was under enormous emotional stress, which is important for her to keep in mind as she considers the situation. Hermione is suffering greatly now because she intuitively understands that though she did not kill Rita, what she desired is morally the same thing. It is simply being brought home to her in a much stronger fashion, since Rita did die soon after Hermione wished it, and since she and the rest of you avoid harm as a result of her death.

“Consider the end of your third year at Hogwarts, your first meeting with Sirius. You thought at that time that he had killed your parents, and your rage was sufficient that you seriously considered killing him. Now, the fact is that you could not have, as you did not know the Killing Curse; you thought you could simply point your wand at him, wish him dead, and it would happen. You did not in fact do so, but if you had, you would have been morally culpable of murder despite not actually having killed. The intent is more important than the action, since random events can change the outcome of the action. You understand this; you discussed with Ginny and Severus the question of whether in preventing Rita from writing Hermione was motivated by revenge or protectiveness. You felt that her intent was important, and it is.”

Harry looked down sadly as it started to sink in just how difficult this would be for Hermione, hard enough as the past few days had been already. “Is there anything I can say to her that will help, make her feel less responsible?”

“You only can if she blames herself for things that were not her responsibility,” advised Dumbledore. “You can remind her of your unconditional love and support, as can the others. Beyond that, this is a process that she must go through. She will want to change this about herself, and you can encourage her. There are similarities to what you went through after Hogsmeade, though in that case you bore no moral responsibility. You had to go through your grief, and there was little your friends could do for you, much as they wanted to. That will be the

case with Hermione as well. There are also similarities to what you and Neville have been through, when you used the Cruciatus Curse. She did have more opportunity for reflection than did you or Neville, but she too was under nearly unbearable stress, and she must consider this as she evaluates her actions and thoughts. You can remind her of this.

“There is one other thing you can do: you may show her your memories of this conversation. It will be painful for her, but it is pain that she will go through sooner or later, and the sooner she goes through it, the less she will suffer. It is her choice, of course; she must deal with this in her own time and fashion.

“We should finish here for the night, as we are approaching the point beyond which I do not wish to deprive you of sleep. We will talk again tomorrow night.” Harry nodded, and was asleep again.

He woke up and looked around to see that Ron and Neville had already awoken and left the room. A look at the clock showed that the time was seven-ten, which meant that he had gotten enough sleep, despite the conversation with Dumbledore. He got up and closed the door so he could change into his day clothes.

A half a minute later, there was a knock on the door. “Just a minute,” he said, as he finished putting on a shirt. “Okay, come in.”

Hermione opened the door and entered the room, looking haggard and sleep-deprived. “Did you get much sleep?” asked Harry.

“About four hours, I think,” she replied. “I’m very sure I wouldn’t have gotten any at all if it hadn’t been for Fawkes. I wanted to thank him, and to thank you.”

He shrugged lightly to indicate that Fawkes had been the one to actually do what she was thanking him for. “You know I would do anything I could for you.”

She nodded. “I know. Did you talk to Albus last night?” At his nod, she continued, “Did he say anything about my situation?”

He nodded again. “It was the main topic. He said I could show you, if you wanted to see it. It doesn’t have to be now, of course, it could be anytime you’re ready.”

“No, I’d rather do it now, or else I’m just going to spend all my time wondering what he said.” Harry pulled out the Pensieve and put in his memories as they sat on his bed. He decided to join her in watching it in case she had any comments or questions. She didn’t, and they watched in silence. She was expressionless throughout the viewing.

They exited the Pensieve, and her face still showed no emotion for a few seconds. Then she suddenly started crying, and buried her head in Harry’s shoulder. He held her as she cried harder; he was reminded of how he felt after Hogsmeade, how he had cried longer and harder than he ever had before. Reaching for his wand, he soundproofed the door to remove the chance she would be heard downstairs, then put down his wand and held her tightly again. He said nothing, trying to convey his support through how he held her.

She cried for a long time; maybe five minutes, he thought. She finally stopped, and stayed in his embrace as she recovered. As she disengaged from him, he looked around for a box of tissues, but couldn’t see any. She pulled a package from a pants pocket. “I always carry one of these. I have to, you know how often I cry.” He smiled sadly.

Recovering her composure, she said, “He was right, of course, about pretty much everything. I’d never heard the part about how thoughts are so important, but I understood what he meant. I felt like I was in denial last night about her death, which I guess is why I didn’t react more then. I think I knew I had to face this kind of thing, and I didn’t want to.”

She gave him a very serious look, one that communicated just how much she trusted him. “What made it worse, and what he either didn’t know or didn’t say, is that when Kingsley said she was dead, my first reaction was one of triumph, of satisfaction. I mean, I was stunned, like we all were, but I know some part of me

felt that way. It didn't take me long to feel ashamed of that, of course, but I knew I still felt that way. I just tried not to think about it. Then I got into bed and started thinking about it. I think I was about to start crying when Fawkes appeared and started singing. Then I cried a little, just because it was such a nice thing for you to have done, and it reminded me that I have friends who love me. Then I felt undeserving of that, because of what I had done, I must be an awful person, the rest of you wouldn't have suffered like you did if not for me... it was so hard not to think things like that. I tried really hard to concentrate on the song, it helped a lot."

"I'm really glad." Remembering what Dumbledore had said near the end of the talk about supporting her, he said, "I'll always love you, Hermione, we all will. That wouldn't change even if you had actually killed her."

He could see her appreciation in her eyes. "I'm glad you say that, because it really is as if I did. He was right, it is morally equivalent. I know, I know what you're going to say, I was under terrible pressure, and it's not that different from what you and Neville did. In a way it's not as bad, because unlike you and Neville, what I did had no direct result. But in a way it's worse, because I had an opportunity for reflection that you and Neville didn't, and I reacted with violent thoughts and desires anyway. I really think I would have done it, Harry. If I'd seen a beetle, I would have stepped on it. I was that far gone."

"It's still not that different from Neville or I," he argued. "I'm not sure I wouldn't have killed Lestrage if I thought I could've, and Neville's intent was to make her go mad, which is a lot like murder. And I'm not sure I'd say you had much opportunity for reflection. It was like you were being, I don't know, mentally tortured. How much rational reflection can you do, with what was being done to you? You can't excuse Neville and I for what we did without excusing yourself too."

She smiled a little. "Albus said you should remind me of that, and you did." She sighed, then continued, "I know that's true, at least part of me does. He was also right that in some ways this would be for me like what Hogsmeade was for you, something I have to get through, and something that no amount of rational

thinking is going to help. I'm pretty sure I'll never wish anyone dead again. At least I hope so, but I suppose I can't know for certain until something like this happens again, which I really hope it doesn't."

"You won't," he said, feeling sure it was true. "You'll remember how this felt, and you'll react differently."

She gave him a wan smile. He knew she appreciated his support and hoped it was true, but still wasn't convinced. "Come on, let's go get some breakfast," she suggested. He agreed, and they headed downstairs. He hoped she would feel better soon, but he knew it could take some time.

* * * * *

Later that afternoon, Harry walked into Snape's office and sat down. Saying nothing, he looked up at Snape, his expression conveying to Snape that he could begin any time he wanted. Snape raised an eyebrow. "Not even a comment about the weather?"

Despite not being sure whether he was being teased, mocked, or something in between, Harry found that he couldn't help but smile at Snape's remark. He wondered if Snape's sense of humor was growing on him. At the same time, it occurred to him that Snape's more usual sense of humor included far more cutting remarks, and Harry understood that Snape was on his best behavior for him, so any joke Snape made was bound to be a mild one. Part of his adjustment to this, thought Harry. He's treating me in some ways as he would have treated Albus; even though I'm not Albus, I'm doing what he did.

"I guess I'm kind of preoccupied today," said Harry. "A lot's been happening recently. I assume you heard about what happened to Skeeter."

"Of course," Snape replied, and offered no further comment. He took out his wand and started viewing memories. To Harry's mild surprise, he again viewed recent events, starting with Hugo's visit on Thursday morning, continuing with

Hermione's account of her and Neville's meeting with Kingsley on Friday, her and Harry's meeting with Dentus, Harry's dinner with Ginny and the rest of the evening, his conversation with Dumbledore while he slept, and finally, his conversation with Hermione in the morning. The session took an hour and a half, a little longer than usual.

"Let me ask you something," said Snape upon finishing. "For the sake of discussion, let us suppose that last night when Mr. Shacklebolt visited you, he had informed you that it was he who had killed Skeeter, and given as reasons the same ones he enumerated when explaining that he was a logical suspect. What would your reaction have been?"

Harry raised his eyebrows; it would never have occurred to him to wonder such a thing. "I don't know... I guess I would have been upset. I wouldn't have wanted him to do that. I don't think there are any circumstances where I could approve of cold-blooded murder. There would have to be other possibilities, like Memory Charms, other ways to deal with her knowing things she wasn't supposed to know."

Snape looked at Harry disdainfully, as if he had expected better from him. "Memory Charms can be broken, as you know perfectly well, and there is no one as skilled at breaking them as the Dark Lord. You might argue that the chances that the Dark Lord would ever discover that she had such information are quite small, and it is possible that that is true. But when even such small chances are weighed against the consequences of their occurrence, they must be taken very seriously.

"In addition, Skeeter was obviously a substantial risk for other reasons. Mr. Brantell's assurances that she was bluffing notwithstanding, her hatred of Miss Granger could very well have driven her to change her mind about revealing such information. Skeeter also threatened to reveal our relationship, and since Miss Granger was forced to edit the memory from what Mr. Brantell saw, he was unable to offer an opinion as to her veracity. She may well have been serious. This is something that Mr. Shacklebolt of course could not know and take into

consideration in his decision, but you should, in your evaluation of such a hypothetical action on Mr. Shacklebolt's part."

"And revealing that would cost us you as a spy," Harry acknowledged. "I do understand that... it's just a moral thing, I guess. I just don't think I could accept it, no matter what the circumstances. I mean, I stopped Remus and Sirius from killing Pettigrew, and he was responsible for my parents being killed."

"Yes, and look at the result of that action," said Snape, still polite but becoming somewhat emotional in making his argument. "He escaped, and helped the Dark Lord rise again. Many have died at his hands already, and more certainly will. Was the cost of saving that one life, the man who betrayed your parents, really worth that?"

Harry felt anger rise up, as it seemed to him that Snape was blaming him for all the deaths caused by Voldemort since that time. He understood the causal connection, but had thought about morality and blame enough over the past year to know that he was to blame only for his own actions, not those of anyone else. "I did the right thing," he replied, trying to keep his anger under control. "He was supposed to be taken into custody, to go to Azkaban. It wasn't my fault he escaped."

Snape relentlessly pressed his argument; Harry wondered if Snape was ignoring Harry's clear though subdued emotional reaction. "It must always be assumed that any prisoner could escape at any time. You were thirteen, and this clearly did not occur to you. What concerns me is that you would probably make the same decision today, even knowing the potential consequences."

"Yes, I would," agreed Harry. "And Albus would agree. He approved of what I did with Pettigrew."

Snape sighed. "The headmaster was not perfect, as he himself said many times. This attitude, this moral absolutism, was the trait of his which I most feared would cost our cause dearly, and it almost did. You no doubt recall that had I not searched Malfoy's belongings in January in violation of the headmaster's wishes, you

would be dead, and our cause gravely wounded. I strongly feel this attitude was an indulgence on his part, and now on yours. Is it really a greater good to take the chance of hundreds or thousands dying, so that you do not have one death on your conscience? Is your conscience sufficiently salved by the knowledge that you did not personally inflict those thousands of deaths, even though your actions foreseeably allowed them to occur?"

Harry was silent. He could see Snape's point, but he didn't think he could bring himself to approve of killing anyone. As he thought, Snape spoke again. "I do not hope to persuade you, Professor, of the correctness of my position. Your attitude is based in part on notions of conscience and morality, neither of which I can competently address. But I would strongly urge you to discuss this matter with both the headmistress and Mr. Shacklebolt. Both have actual experience in dealing with this kind of situation, and clearly understand the stakes involved." Snape paused. Harry saw on Snape's face a rare expression: Snape looked serious and earnest, and was doing his best to control whatever emotion he felt. "I brought up this topic not to anger or provoke you, Professor. I brought it up because I am deeply concerned. I can easily imagine a situation in which you may make a decision which you feel is morally correct, but ends up costing us our chance to defeat the Dark Lord. You understand, as well as is possible for you, what I endure to contribute to this cause. You may then understand why I am very disturbed at the possibility that such a chance could be squandered. I do not want what I have done to be for nothing."

Harry stared straight ahead, deeply conflicted. He was very affected by what Snape had said; it had seemed, in its own way, to be as much a personal plea as a reasoned argument. Harry realized that Snape was essentially asking him to look at the situation from Snape's point of view. Doing so, Harry found he could easily understand why it was so important to Snape, and why he found Harry's attitude so frustrating, even though it was much the same as Dumbledore's had been.

"I understand," said Harry. "I'll think about it."

Snape nodded, clearly having expected nothing more. “The headmistress wished me to ask you to see her after you were finished here.” Harry nodded and left, more preoccupied than when he came in.

Sitting with his five friends in the Burrow living room shortly after returning from Hogwarts, Harry finished his account of his conversation with Snape. He had considered talking about it only with Ginny and Hermione, but decided that he could tell the rest provided that he made no references to the nature of his relationship with Snape. The others knew he spent time with Snape anyway, so it would not be a surprise that he had conversations with him.

“So, I feel like I have to take what he said very seriously,” said Harry. “Of course I can’t tell you three exactly what it is that makes what he does to help the Order so difficult. I will say that while I said that what I do to help him isn’t easy, it’s a lot less difficult than what he does. He has a good reason not to want what he does to go to waste.”

“But you were right, it wasn’t your fault that Pettigrew escaped,” argued Ron, “and I don’t think it was exactly foreseeable that he would help Voldemort come back. After all, plenty of Death Eaters were free all along, and they hadn’t found him or brought him back.”

“Well, yes and no,” said Harry. “Remember, earlier that day in Divination, I’d gotten that prophecy about the Dark Lord’s servant returning to him. If I’d thought about that, which at the time I didn’t, I could have foreseen that it referred to Pettigrew. Anyway, though, I think he was talking more about some future situation when he used the word ‘foreseeable.’ And I think he knows that I’m not really capable of killing, so it would have to be a situation like Pettigrew, where I stopped someone from being killed. It could be the case that they had information that could really hurt the Order, and because of me they were captured instead of killed, and later escaped. Something like that, I guess.”

“It’s hard to imagine a specific situation,” said Pansy, “but I kind of see his point. It’s hard to imagine you approving of murder. But what if by killing, or allowing the killing of, one Death Eater, you save twenty innocent people?”

Harry nodded. “Albus’s attitude about that was, you’re responsible for what you do, not for what others do. You have to do what you think is right, and killing is wrong, period. Snape’s attitude is that if you reasonably knew or could guess that this person would kill, and you fail to stop it, then you have some responsibility. I can see both points, and I’m just not sure where I would stand. I feel like the threat to those twenty people would have to be really clear before I could seriously consider approving someone being killed.”

“I’m sorry to ask this,” said Ron, “but keeping in mind that Death Eaters have escaped before and might again, what if it was some powerful Death Eater who had vowed to kill Ginny as soon as he got the chance?”

Harry looked down, then at Ginny. Her face told him that she wouldn’t want him to do something that would cause him to suffer, for her sake. He found, however, that that didn’t affect his answer. “It’s a good question. I guess from a strict moral point of view, it shouldn’t matter whether it’s Ginny or not, but of course it does. I can’t say for sure, but I know I would very seriously consider it. I might do it. And I know that if I do it for her, I should do it for others, because those people who might get killed have loved ones like I have Ginny.” He paused, thinking. “Albus was an absolutist, and I think he would have accepted that kind of risk to his wife, even, rather than kill or approve of killing. I know I feel a lot like he did, but I don’t think I can be an absolutist about it. Not considering how scared I already am of something happening to Ginny, or the rest of you, for that matter.”

Ginny pulled Harry closer to her, hugging him around his shoulders from behind. “I would want you to do what you thought was right, but I do understand how you feel. I know there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to make sure you were safe, whether it was moral or not.”

“Did you talk to McGonagall about this?” asked Neville. “What did she say?”

Harry’s small shrug indicated that it hadn’t been that helpful. “She said basically the same thing as Albus did when I was trying to decide whether or not to support the ARA, that it’s a matter of judgment and we have to do what we think is right, that there are no right-or-wrong, black-or-white answers. I asked her if she could condone killing Skeeter, and she said she thought it was a difficult choice; she agreed with Kingsley that you could make a good case for it, but she would want more information and to talk to her personally before making that kind of decision. She said that if she had known the situation, she would have visited Skeeter at her home with someone like Hugo, or a very skilled Legilimens, or made her drink Veritaserum. Then she would have asked questions about what Skeeter intended to reveal, or under what circumstances she would reveal anything. What McGonagall would do next would depend on the answers she got. That way, if she did agree to have Skeeter killed, at least she would be personally certain that it was absolutely necessary. Even then, she said, she knew her conscience would disturb her quite a lot. But she said that she’s willing to have that on her conscience if necessary, considering what’s at stake.”

Everyone was silent, taking in what Harry had said. Finally Ron said, “It’s funny, halfway through that I was thinking, ‘wow, what she’s talking about is really illegal,’ but then it occurred to me that that kind of thing isn’t so important compared to defeating or losing to Voldemort.”

Hermione spoke, Harry noticed, for the first time in the conversation. Usually she would be an active participant, but Harry guessed that as the topic was whether murder was justified in any circumstances, she may have felt it was too close emotionally to what she was going through. “Governments do that all the time, both wizard and Muggle, when their security interests are at stake. And McGonagall has lives in her hands now, the same way Albus did. Do you know, Harry, if she’s now the leader of the Order?”

“From the way she talked, I think it’s not just her, but her and Kingsley. Officially, of course, it’s the Ministry and the Aurors who are supposed to be making decisions like that, but the Order has been leading the fight for so long now that they have a much better organization. Also, Snape’s intelligence goes to the Order, not to the Ministry.”

“From her saying that, I would think it was possible that Skeeter was killed by someone in the Order,” said Ron, “but the problem is that they didn’t know that Skeeter knew what she knew. Unless they did know, but somehow in a way different than we did.”

“I suppose we can’t know that,” agreed Harry, “but right now I’m inclined to think what Kingsley said that night is true, that it was just Death Eaters finishing the job they started, and it’s just coincidence that they...” He shrugged lightly, embarrassed. “I was going to say ‘did us a favor,’ which sounds terrible, but you know what I mean.”

“It also occurred to me,” added Neville, “that they might have killed her for a similar reason that they killed Fudge. I guess they killed Fudge just to scare the Ministry, to tell them that none of them are safe, and they shouldn’t do things like the ARA if they don’t want to get killed. Remember, when Skeeter was killed, she had just recently written that article about Harry’s childhood. Even though we know Harry didn’t like it and didn’t want it to be written, it made Harry look good. Maybe they killed her to let people know that ‘if we try to kill you once and fail, we’ll try again,’ and as a message to journalists not to write nice things about Harry, and to make them nervous about writing anti-Voldemort stuff.”

Harry nodded. “It makes sense. Anybody who does anything they don’t like is going to be a possible target. We’ve always heard about what it was like sixteen years ago, the atmosphere of fear, of terror. It seems like they’re trying to do that again.”

There was another silence at that thought. Then Ginny asked, “Did you talk to her about anything else?”

“Well, it was more like she talked to me, but yes. She gave me a lecture, reprimanding me for not telling her about Skeeter’s threats right away—”

“I told her that was my fault,” interjected Hermione. “When I told her the story last night, she said that, and I told her that that was what I wanted, that it wasn’t your idea.”

“She did say that you told her that, but she said that I should have insisted that we tell her. The lecture was about how important it is for the Order leadership to have all necessary information as soon as possible, and we need to tell her right away if we find out something that we know would interest them, or could be a security issue. I can see that she’s right, I guess we all thought of it more as a personal thing. She also said I still need to decide on the fifth-year prefects, the Quidditch brooms thing, and how or if I’m going to teach the energy of love.”

Ron and Ginny started speaking at exactly the same time, stopped, and gestured for each other to proceed. Ron persisted, and Ginny asked her question first. “Are you going to? Have you decided what you’re going to do about that?”

“No, I’m not sure what I’m going to do yet. I’m kind of leaning toward not doing it yet, maybe starting it in classes next year, not this year. I mean, we do know that it can be taught, but we know so little about it. Considering how difficult it is to do, and how... unusual the way of doing it is, I don’t know if I want to try to teach it to three hundred people right away. Some people may not even want to do it when they find out what it involves.”

“They’ll want to, Harry,” said Neville. “For a shield against the Killing Curse?”

“I think parents will want their children to do it,” suggested Hermione, “but as we know, the students themselves will have to want it pretty badly. I’m not sure how badly they’ll feel they need that shield, especially at age eleven. But let me ask you something. When we had that conversation with McGonagall the night Albus died, you said you would probably teach it in your classes this year, that you couldn’t think of any reason not to. What made you change your mind?”

Harry looked at Ron and said, "A few things... one was your experience. I mean, you're seventeen, close friends with all of us, highly motivated, and in love, but you still might not have been able to get it if I hadn't gone poking around in your mind. Most students will be younger, and most won't be in love, even if they have a boyfriend or girlfriend. Yes, most will have friends and be motivated, but probably not as much as you were. I just feel like it's going to be a huge challenge for them, and I can't do Legilimens on them like I did with you, since I think a lot of parents wouldn't approve even if the kids said it was okay. I just think what happened with you made me realize that there's a lot we don't know about it. People are going to be disappointed if they try all year and don't have it by the end of the year. You all got it, but maybe the next step is to try it with adults, people who I don't know quite so well. Doing it with the Aurors, like Kingsley asked, will be a good next step."

"Couldn't you do it with, say, just one class as a test, and see how that goes?" suggested Ginny.

Hermione responded, "The problem with that is, how does he pick the class? I mean, if he picked his Slytherin and Gryffindor firsts, I guess they'll be second years soon, people would think it was favoritism, like he liked them better. It could be seen that way with whatever class he did it with. The other classes would say, 'why not us?'" But one thing you could do, Harry, is think about trying it with the seventh years as an experiment. If anyone said it was favoritism, you could say that this is their last chance to learn it before they graduate, which would be true. You would also have Neville, Ron, Pansy, and I to help you, if you wanted."

"That's an interesting thought," said Harry. "I'll think about that. Of course, everyone would have to agree. If even one person didn't want to, I'm not sure I'd be comfortable doing it."

"Why?" asked Ron. "People might not necessarily like any particular thing in a class, and teachers teach it anyway. You're the teacher, you decide what the curriculum is. You can't make them want to, and I know it won't work for them if

they don't want to, but is it fair to the ninety percent who want to do it, if you don't do it because of the other ten percent?"

Harry could see Ron's point, but he didn't like the idea of spending a lot of class time on something that some people would definitely not use. "Well, like I said, I'll think about it. I'll probably talk about it in the first class, see what people say, how strongly they feel. So, what were you going to ask, Ron?"

"I wanted to know what you were going to do about the Quidditch brooms thing," said Ron, his expression suggesting that he was hoping for a particular answer.

"I think I'm going to say yes, I'll agree with Flitwick and Sprout. I know it wouldn't exactly benefit us this year, but I have to think about the future. Besides, Snape will never agree anyway, so it won't matter. But even if he did, well, I still think we could win the Cup with brooms that were no better than anyone else's."

Ron looked unhappy, though not upset. "I guess I understand, though it'd be sad to have two Firebolts and not use them. But you're right, Snape won't agree, so I shouldn't worry about it."

"I have a question, Harry," said Pansy. "Well, for you and Ginny, really. We never did get to hear what happened at the Golden Dragon last night."

Harry and Ginny started to tell the story together. It occurred to Harry that so much had happened since then, it seemed as though the dinner had been longer ago than it really was.

After dinner that night, Harry met with Kingsley and two other Aurors, and they Apparated to Privet Drive to fulfill their promise to the Dursleys to protect their house from Apparation. Harry wondered whether the Dursleys would say anything to him about the article, but fortunately, it wasn't necessary for him to go into the house, and they didn't come out. It took him a little under two hours. Ginny had offered to come with him and keep him company, but he had declined;

towards the end of the two hours, he found himself wishing he had taken her up on it.

The next morning, soon after breakfast, Molly announced that she wanted the house cleared. She wouldn't say what she was doing, just that she needed for nobody else to be in the house for a few hours. Harry and Ginny exchanged a smile, knowing where they would go to spend the time. He wondered what Molly was doing, but he found that he didn't wonder for long.

Three hours later, at eleven o'clock, Fawkes deposited them in the Burrow living room. They sat down on the sofa, and a minute later, Hermione came through the fireplace, followed by Neville. To Harry's surprise, and obviously Neville's, Hermione asked Neville to sit on the sofa. He did so, then she asked Harry and Neville to close their eyes for a few seconds.

"That seems like a very odd thing to want us to do," said Harry. "Why in the world—"

"There's a spell I've been learning, it'll make the room look different," explained Hermione impatiently. "I don't want you to see it while it's happening, I just want you to see what it looks like afterwards. Just humor me, okay?"

Harry and Neville exchanged a glance and a shrug, and closed their eyes. Harry wondered why Hermione hadn't asked Ginny to close her eyes too; as he was about to open his mouth to ask, Hermione spoke again. "Okay, you can open your eyes now."

Harry did, and gave a sudden start as he saw about fifteen or twenty people who hadn't been there a few seconds ago. "Happy Birthday!" they shouted, as his face registered his astonishment. Hermione sat down next to an equally surprised Neville, and Ginny did next to Harry.

"You didn't think we were going to let your seventeenth birthdays go by without any celebration, did you?" asked a smiling Hermione. She kissed Neville as Ginny kissed Harry, and the guests clapped and cheered.

Harry and Neville still hadn't quite recovered from their shock. "How did..." Neville began, then trailed off.

"You remember I was gone for a few hours yesterday," Hermione said. "Kingsley was nice enough to take some time to teach me how to Disillusion people and make them reappear again. Thank you, everyone, for standing so still. See, you might have seen them if they'd moved. Anyway, this is a birthday party for the both of you. I'd hoped to have one closer to your birthdays, but the Apparation crisis kind of put that on hold. Today seemed like a good day. So, happy birthday."

Harry finally smiled. "That's really nice, Hermione, thank you. And thank you, everyone, for coming."

"Well, Ginny helped," pointed out Hermione.

"Just inviting people, it was your idea," responded Ginny.

"Well, you two can go off and argue about it," joked Pansy. "We'll just go ahead and have the party."

Harry stood and started walking among the people, thanking them individually for coming. He saw most of the people from Hogwarts he liked and was friendly with. He greeted Dean, Seamus, Parvati, and Lavender, then moved on to a group of Hufflepuffs: Justin, Ernie, Hannah, and Susan Bones. He noted that most of the people present had been in the D.A. He also saw Cho, Luna, and Justin's brother, David. Moving on, he saw all three Creeveys, and greeted them warmly. "Hi, Colin, Dennis, Andrea, thanks for coming."

"Well, it was nice of Ginny to invite us," responded Colin. "Not much chance we'd turn it down."

"Happy birthday, Professor," chirped Andrea excitedly.

"Thanks, Andrea, but you can call me Harry here," replied Harry, as Colin and Dennis exchanged amused smiles.

She looked doubtful. "It just seems strange, because I've always called you 'Professor.' They knew you before you were a professor, so it's not so strange for them."

“I don’t feel so much like a professor right now,” said Harry. “Just a normal seventeen-year-old, I suppose.” Looking around, he added, “It’s nice, really, this is the first birthday party I’ve ever had.”

The Creeveys’ expressions became somber. “We read the article, of course,” said Dennis. “We really felt bad for you. We know you told Colin and I a bit about it, of course, but...”

“It wasn’t as bad as she made it sound,” said Harry, definitely feeling as though he didn’t want to be pitied. “Okay, it wasn’t good, but she just played up all the bad stuff.”

“Well, there was plenty to play up,” pointed out Colin. “But you know, what surprised me was that I recognized a few of the quotes, from that conversation we had when Dennis made the team. Did you say that to her?”

Annoyed, Harry shook his head. “That’s what I hate about the article, everyone will think I did. No, she got all the quotes in the article by hiding nearby as a beetle. She knew I would never have talked to her, and that I wouldn’t have wanted the article written.”

“Why not?” wondered Colin. “From what I know, it’s basically true, and it makes you look good, unlike her other articles about you.”

“It makes me look like some tragic victim, and... I don’t know, even if she had just written the truth with no exaggeration, I feel like it’s personal, that I don’t need everyone to know everything bad that happened to me. I mean, Dennis, imagine that she had written an article about you, about how Hogsmeade affected you. How you struggled with what happened, how it was hard for you to go back there, but you did it anyway. Maybe it would be true, but it’s personal, it’s not the kind of thing you want everyone knowing, and reading about.”

Dennis nodded somberly. “I guess I can see it when you put it that way. I wouldn’t want to be written about like that. Of course, nobody would write an article about me like that. I guess that’s a problem with being Harry Potter.”

“There’s some good things about it too, so I guess I can deal with it,” he said. He talked with them a little longer, then moved on; the next person he saw was Luna Lovegood. “Hi, Luna,” he said. “Thanks for coming.”

“Oh, it’s no problem, Professor, I wasn’t busy,” she said causally.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “You really don’t have to call me ‘Professor,’ you know.”

“Oh, I know,” she agreed. “I just like to say it sometimes. It has a nice sound. ‘Professor Potter.’ It kind of rolls off the tongue.” Harry nodded politely, as he had dealt with Luna enough to not be surprised when she said things that sounded odd. “So, are you going to teach us how to do those spells of yours?”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. “I haven’t decided yet. I want to, but there’s still a lot I don’t know about how it works. Also, it asks a lot of the students, they might have to do things they aren’t comfortable with.”

“Like what?” inquired Luna.

“Like thinking about love, not being embarrassed by it, maybe even talking about it around other people they might not be close to,” Harry explained.

Luna shrugged. “I can do that. I love my father, and my mother, even though she’s gone. And my grandmother. There’s really no one my age who I could say I love, but if there was, I wouldn’t be embarrassed to say so.”

“That’s good,” said Harry, impressed. “I have no trouble believing that.”

“I’m glad,” she said. Then, as if a thought had suddenly occurred to her, she added, “But I do like you a lot.”

To Harry’s surprise, he found that he wasn’t embarrassed by what she’d said, probably because her manner was so casual and straightforward. He smiled and said, “Thank you, Luna. I like you a lot, too.”

Smiling a little, she nodded. “I know, I can tell. It’s in your eyes. You don’t get embarrassed like you used to.”

He shrugged. “After talking about love in front of the whole school, and in the newspapers, there’s not that much left to be embarrassed about.”

With obvious amusement, she replied, "I bet I could ask you things about you and Ginny that would embarrass you." He said nothing, but smiled in mild embarrassment at the thought. Nodding as though his reaction was what she had expected, she said, "But I don't really want to embarrass you, so I won't. Anyway, just keep in mind, if you do have a class on that, I want to be in it."

"I'll keep it in mind," he assured her.

"Good. Well, I hope I can talk to you some more later, but I should let some other people have a chance at you. Happy birthday." She reached up to kiss him on the cheek, then turned and walked away. Harry was reminded of when she had done something similar the year before, and smiled. She really would be good for a class on that, he thought.

Six hours later, after the last of the guests had left, Harry and his friends sat in the living room. "So, it seemed like you both had a good time," observed Hermione.

Neville nodded. "It was great. Thanks for doing it."

"Me too, of course," agreed Harry. "It was nice to see everyone again. Although I started getting tired of being asked if I was going to teach the new spells. I think almost everybody asked at some point."

"Well, it's easy to see why there's a lot of interest in it," said Neville. "But yes, for me too, there was one thing almost everyone mentioned. Bet you can't guess what it is," he added with mild sarcasm.

"Does it begin with the letter 'A'?" asked Ron in the same vein.

"I guess people can't put themselves in that position very well," said Neville. "I tell everyone that it's not really that brave, since there was no hope anyway, but they act like I'm just being modest."

"Welcome to my world," said Harry humorously. "But I guess it's not so surprising that people can't identify with it. Most of us have been in that kind of situation, and we know that you may as well be defiant if you think you're finished

anyway... Hermione taunting Voldemort last month, Ginny not saying anything to Malfoy in the Chamber, Pansy more or less taunting Malfoy by talking about me.”

“Hmmm, hadn’t thought of it this way,” said Ron. “I guess the only time I faced what looked like certain death was when we were surrounded by those spiders, and they probably wouldn’t have understood defiance all that well. I did, however, acquit myself with extraordinary bravery, in that I did not wet my pants.”

The others laughed heartily at Ron’s unusual venture into self-deprecating humor. Pansy ran a hand through Ron’s hair. “I’d say that’s pretty brave,” she agreed.

“That was very good, Ron,” said Hermione as she finished laughing. “Well, I’m really glad it worked out so well. I just felt bad that so much was happening on your birthdays that we didn’t really get to do much of anything. Not that we always have such a big deal about birthdays, since most people’s happen during the school year, but this was the seventeenth for both of you, which is a little more important.”

“Oh, I just remembered,” said Ron, as he waved his wand, and a few seconds later an envelope came floating in. “It’s nice to be able to do the spells silently, it’s just kind of cool. Anyway, I know we did the cards and gifts while everyone was here, but I wanted to save mine for when everyone had left. It’s the kind of thing I didn’t want Harry reading out loud, people might not have really understood.”

Harry blinked in surprise. Had Ron written something heartfelt? It seemed out of character, but he supposed that after their Legilimency session, anything was possible. He was then surprised that Ron would worry that Harry would read such a card out loud.

Smiling, Ron handed Harry the card. As he opened it to read it, Harry wondered whether Ron could tell what he had been thinking. “You can read it out loud if you want,” said Ron.

With another surprised expression, Harry did so. “Dear Harry: On this, your seventeenth birthday, I wanted to take the opportunity to say a few things. These would ordinarily be difficult for me to say, but I’ll do my best.

“We’ve known each other for six years now, and I can’t imagine having a more...’ there’s a blank space, like nothing was written there.” He looked at Ron in confusion.

Ron shrugged. “You know how I get embarrassed at things like that.”

Harry was again surprised, as he thought Ron was past that. He continued reading: “...having a more _____ friend,” he continued, having decided to pause for a second for every blank space he saw. “When we first met, I knew immediately that I would never encounter a more _____ person, and that it was _____ that we would become friends. Ever since you showed such amazing _____ when you insisted that we save Hermione from the troll, our lives have never been anything but _____, and I’m _____ about it. Now, you get praised all the time, and it’s very _____, since we all know how _____ you are. And I know how embarrassed it makes you, which is very _____. But I wanted to say that you’ve had a _____ influence on my life, and I feel very _____. Even now, learning about the energy of love has been incredibly _____, and you are totally responsible for that. I think it is safe to say that you are a truly _____ person. I _____ you. Happy Birthday, Ron. P.S. It’s really very _____ that you _____ me so much, so _____.”

He looked at the still smiling Ron, very puzzled. “Am I supposed to guess what the blank words are, or...”

Ron shook his head. “You can use your wand over the blank spots, and the words will appear.”

Harry took out his wand, held it over the card sentence by sentence, and read it again. Coming to the first blank, he read, “I can’t imagine having a more *adequate* friend.” He smiled at Ron, then continued, emphasizing slightly for the others’ benefit the words in the formerly blank spaces. “When we first met, I knew immediately that I would never encounter a more *unremarkable* person, and that it

was *pure chance* that we would become friends. Ever since you showed such amazing *recklessness* when you insisted that we save Hermione from the troll, our lives have never been anything but *dull*, and I'm *apathetic* about it."

Harry was now laughing as he read. "Now, you get praised all the time, and it's very *strange*, since we all know how *average* you are. And I know how embarrassed it makes you, which is very *entertaining*. But I wanted to say that you've had a *minor* influence on my life, and I feel very *indifferent*. Even now, learning about the energy of love has been incredibly *embarrassing*, and you are totally responsible for that. I think it is safe to say that you are a truly *unexceptional* person. I *kind of like* you. Happy Birthday, Ron. P.S. It's really very *disturbing* that you *bug* me so much, so *cut it out*."

Still laughing, he said, "Well, you definitely get one for that," and moved over on the sofa and hugged Ron. "I meant every word of it," said Ron as he hugged Harry back, which made Harry laugh again.

"Thank you, Ron. I really appreciate the effort you put into that. It must have taken a while to write, not to mention the invisible ink."

"Yeah, it did take a while," Ron agreed casually. "Ten minutes at least."

"Don't let him fool you," said Pansy, looking at Ron proudly. "That took him quite a while, I saw him working on it."

"He wasn't fooling me," Harry assured her. "Ah, it's been a while since I've laughed that much." There was a silence, then he said, "It feels strange... the Skeeter thing is over, the Apparation crisis is over... I'm just trying to think, is there anything I have to be really thinking about? Can I just enjoy the rest of my summer? I mean, I'm going to be doing the energy-of-love sessions with the Aurors, but that's only a few hours a week."

"Because today is the day we're celebrating your birthday, Harry, I'm not going to answer that question," said Hermione humorously.

"Oh, yeah, the rulebook," he sighed. "That'll be fun. I'll be reading it, saying, 'oh, yeah, I broke this one, and that one...'"

“It’ll help you remember them,” said Ginny. “Well, apart from that, I think it’s all right if you enjoy the rest of your summer. In fact, I’ll do my best to help.”

“I have a feeling you will,” he chuckled. He hoped the rest of the summer would be as peaceful as the first two weeks had been.

* * * * *

The next week was, at least. Harry had his sessions with Snape, energy-of-love sessions with the Aurors, Legilimency practice with Hermione almost every day, and reading the rule book to occupy him, but he still found plenty of time for leisure. He read Dumbledore’s book, spent time with his friends, and luxuriated in his freedom. He spent the better part of one day with Remus, who assured him that he shouldn’t feel bad about not being able to go to an amusement park on the day before his birthday, as they’d planned. “That was during the Apparation crisis, but you can’t really be going to places where there are lots of Muggles anyway,” Remus had pointed out. Harry knew it was true; he could imagine the potential for innocent Muggles to get caught in the crossfire.

Before his first energy-of-love session with the Aurors, Harry had the idea to include Remus in the sessions. Kingsley hadn’t objected, which Harry assumed was partly because all the Aurors in the group knew Remus, as all were in the Order. Harry knew also that Kingsley wasn’t likely to object to anything Harry suggested, as he had made clear that everything about the sessions was at Harry’s discretion. Kingsley had decided not to participate in the sessions rather than forswear the use of the Killing Curse, but he did agree to allow Tonks, Cassandra, Jack, and Winston to do so, and they had. Kingsley had also pointed out that he wouldn’t have been an ideal member of the first test group because his non-vocalized-spell score was already 100, so unlike others, there would be no easy way to tell if he had reached the point where he could do the spells.

“How are the sessions with the Aurors going?” asked Hermione as they sat down to dinner on Friday.

Harry exchanged shrugs with Neville before answering. “Okay, I suppose. You know how it is, it’s not the kind of thing where you can really tell anything. There are no obvious problems, anyway. Everyone’s pretty serious about it, no one’s reluctant or embarrassed or anything.”

“I was wondering, Harry,” asked Ron, “who’s Remus going to focus on? It doesn’t seem like he really has anybody. I mean, we all had each other.”

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “I wondered about that myself, really. I’m not sure if I should ask him or not. With us, we all kind of knew already. Here, it’s only been three sessions, so I didn’t think it was necessary to just jump right into really personal stuff. I know we’ll get there at some point soon, though.”

“I’m just curious,” said Arthur, “not knowing much about this... why is it necessary to talk about who you’re thinking about when you’re focusing on love? And is it necessary to focus on a particular person? Couldn’t it be just on love as a concept, or could you even make up some idealized fantasy person and focus on that?”

“Those are all good questions, and I don’t know the answer to any of them,” acknowledged Harry. “But to try to answer the first one, part of the point is to overcome whatever embarrassment people may feel. Just saying out loud that you love this person, whether it’s romantic love or friendship love, helps you... I don’t know, embrace it, I guess. It makes it stronger, at least I think it does. The first time I ever said it was after Hermione said it to me that day before the Voldemort dreams started, and I sometimes wonder if I would have managed what I did if that hadn’t happened. I was less embarrassed to think about the fact that I loved her after I had said it. And, we did discover from our own sessions that if someone was embarrassed about it—”

“Though Harry isn’t referring to anyone in particular, of course,” said Ron with a straight face.

Harry smiled, then continued, “Saying it out loud helped. Again, part of the whole point of this is to not be embarrassed about it. You can’t start out not being embarrassed, of course, you just have to work up to it. This is where it’s a lot easier if you have someone you’re in love with, you can focus particularly on them. With us, there was a point where—does anyone mind if I tell Arthur and Molly about this?” he asked his friends, who all gave their assent. “I thought it would be a good idea if we named a specific person we loved, but so it wouldn’t be harder for Ron and Pansy, I asked us all to pick people other than the ones we were in relationships with. And so nobody would feel obligated to name someone who had named them, I asked everyone to write down the person’s name first.”

“And what happened was so strange,” continued Hermione, “because it worked that way anyway: we all picked the person who had picked us. Harry and Pansy picked each other, Neville and Ginny did, and Ron and I did. We were pretty amazed, and we were all wondering if fate had gone a little differently, those could have been the relationships that ended up happening. And I could tell that Ron was dying to make some comment about how lucky he was to avoid ending up with me, but he was nice, and didn’t.”

“I was not,” protested Ron, as the others chuckled. “Well, I wasn’t dying to, anyway. The thought occurred to me, and I decided not to, is all. Boy, you’re really going to be annoying once you start using Legilimency to tell if we’re lying or not.”

“I suppose so,” agreed Hermione, wearing a greatly amused expression. “Good thing you didn’t end up with me, huh?”

Everyone laughed, including Ron. “Well, I didn’t say it, anyway. Let’s just say I’m happy with how it ended up, I think we all are.”

“That does seem safe to say,” agreed Harry, as he looked across the table at Ginny.

There was silence for a minute as everyone devoted their attention to their food. Then Molly casually asked, “Harry, did you ever hear anything more from your cousin about the article, and your aunt and uncle’s reaction to it?”

Harry hadn't thought about the topic at all since he had put down the anti-Disapparation plot at 4 Privet Drive. "No, nothing. I haven't heard from Dudley, and it's pretty unlikely I'd hear from Vernon or Petunia."

"I actually thought about inviting Dudley to your party," said Ginny. "I ended up not doing it mostly for the same reason you didn't take him to Diagon Alley, everyone would have been asking him about the article."

"Well, it's very nice that you're friends with him now," said Molly. Harry thought that 'friends' wasn't quite the right word—he felt that 'on good terms' might be better—but didn't bother to argue the point. "It's just too bad that that article had to come out, just when your aunt and uncle might have been realizing the kind of person you really are."

Harry shrugged. "They're never going to see me any differently than they always have," he said dismissively. "I was with them long enough to know that. All I can say is, thank goodness I'm here now instead of there."

"Well, of course we're very happy about that too, dear," said Molly. "But it isn't impossible, you know. You never know what could happen. Maybe if you wrote her a letter, explain what happened and that you had nothing to do with it—"

"No way," interrupted Harry firmly. "I don't need to explain myself to her."

"I'm not saying you did anything wrong, of course," said Molly soothingly, though Harry didn't feel soothed. "I just meant that she was probably coming around on you, because of those articles she was sent, and—"

"I don't need her to come around on me," snapped Harry, then tried to control his temper as his friends glanced at him with concern. "Seriously, she can think whatever she wants. She's felt that way for so long, I could save the world and cure cancer, and it wouldn't change the way she felt."

"I have a feeling he's right," chimed in Ron, earning an unhappy glance from Molly. "I mean, look at what those articles said about him, and she still jumped to the conclusion that he was responsible for this one. She didn't even ask him if he did anything for it or not."

“And this was even after Dudley told her that Harry had nothing to do with it,” added Ginny. “Mum, I was wondering, who do you think would have bothered to cut out and send all those articles? Seems like a lot of trouble to go to.”

Molly shrugged as she took a bite of food, but didn’t answer. Harry thought her reaction seemed strange for her, and then to his surprise, he got a flash of an image of the type he saw in Legilimency practice: he saw Molly using her wand and doing a Severing Charm to a newspaper. He gaped at her. “You? You sent her those articles?”

Molly looked up as if ready to deny what Harry had said, but obviously a look at Harry’s face told her that it would be no use. “I see the Legilimency practice is really kicking in,” commented Ron.

“I didn’t see what harm it could do,” said Molly defensively, as Harry again tried to keep his feelings under control. “I just wanted her to be able to see what a wonderful person she had there all this time, and didn’t even know.”

“And didn’t even care,” shot back Harry. “Her mind is made up about me.”

“But it was working, it was changing, until that article last week,” argued Molly. “They’re your closest living relatives, you can’t avoid dealing with them.”

“I’ll do my very best,” said Harry fervently. “And I’m sure they will too, her and Vernon. Somehow I think with all of us trying, we’ll manage.”

Molly looked disappointed. “Harry, this isn’t like you. And it wouldn’t hurt to write them a letter, you wouldn’t have to deal with them directly. Even if—”

“Mum, look,—” interrupted Ginny, who was in turn interrupted by Harry. “I’m not going to write her a letter!” he shouted. “I can’t...” Emotion rising up, he impulsively stood. “Excuse me,” he said, and walked away from the table quickly and headed up the stairs.

He entered the bedroom, closing the door behind him. Fawkes was on his perch, and as Harry lay on the bed he wondered whether Fawkes had been there for a while, or had appeared in the last minute, knowing Harry was coming. Harry silently asked Fawkes to stand on his chest, and Harry petted him as he did. He

tried to calm his anger for Fawkes' sake, though a part of him wanted to feel angry. Partly at Molly for interfering, and partly at the situation, his whole childhood. He wondered if this was part of the effect phoenixes normally had on their companions, that they inspired their companions to manage their emotions better for the sake of the phoenix.

He spent the next twenty minutes thinking, going over what had happened, and trading impressions with Fawkes. He felt that Fawkes sympathized with what he had suffered, though he knew Fawkes couldn't have the proper perspective to really understand what Harry had been through, so Harry assumed it was a general sympathy because of his emotional state.

Harry heard a knock on the door, followed by Molly's voice. "Can I come in?" He hesitated for a second, then waved his wand, and the door opened. Molly closed the door behind her and sat down on his bed. Harry felt as though he should apologize for leaving the table, but he wanted her to be the one to speak first. Molly reached over to pet Fawkes. "It must be nice to have a phoenix," she said, her expression serious. "They don't fail you, like people will."

Harry was puzzled, wondering for a second who she was suggesting had failed whom. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said, to his surprise. "I suppose I just got too... invested in what I was doing. I just thought, 'wouldn't it be nice if I could make her see what she's missing, it would be so good for both of them.' Then the Skeeter article came along and messed up my little plan. It never occurred to me that it would be hard for you, even if I tried to do most of the work myself."

She paused; Harry didn't speak partly because he didn't have anything to say, and partly because he could tell she wasn't finished. "The others jumped all over me after you left," she said ruefully. "Mostly Ron and Ginny. The others aren't comfortable with me enough yet to really criticize me, but they clearly agreed with Ron and Ginny. Even Arthur reminded me of how they acted when he came to get you for the Quidditch World Cup, they weren't even going to say goodbye to you. They all were more or less saying, you can't know what it was like for him, and if

he's most comfortable putting it behind him and trying not to think about it, then you should let him. Ron said I was 'butting in,' which I suppose I was. I just want you to know that it's because I care, because I love you." With a very small smile, she added, "I do that with all my children, you just hadn't gotten to experience it yet."

"I know," said Harry. "And I know why you do it, I know you're trying to help. I just felt like you were asking something of me that I couldn't do. I can't look for her approval, and writing a letter would be doing that. I actually talked about this when Dudley was over last week."

"Yes, Ginny told me. Just now, she related most of that conversation to the rest of us. I know it's true, but it's just amazing to me that she could manage to not say one nice thing about you all your life. Sometimes it makes me want to cry, and sometimes it makes me angry. Maybe I've done this because I want to make it all better somehow, and I just have to accept the fact that it's in the past, there's not much I can do about it. Ginny said she wanted to hug you as who you were then, and I think that's how I feel too." She extended a hand toward Harry, who was still lying on the bed. "But I would like to hug you as who you are now."

Fawkes lifted off of Harry's chest and landed on his perch as Harry reached for Molly's hand and let himself be pulled into a hug. "I'm sorry," she said again.

He squeezed her harder. "It's all right. At least I have someone who cares enough to want to butt in, I never had that before."

Molly laughed. "I'll always care enough to want to butt in; the question is, will I manage to not do it."

"Another thing I've never had before," said Harry as if just realizing it, "is someone who I think of as a parent apologizing to me."

She disengaged from the hug, keeping her hands on his shoulders. "I think it's not just your aunt and uncle; most parents don't do that. Arthur's joke about that is that most people feel that being a parent means never having to say you're sorry. But everyone makes mistakes, including parents. It's a good thing to do for other

reasons too, it teaches the kids that it's all right to apologize, and then they'll probably do it with their kids when they grow up. I think if each generation can raise their children a little better than they were raised, we'll be doing all right."

He looked at her with admiration. "I don't know if I can do that."

She smiled. "Thank you. But you will, I'm pretty sure about that." She kissed him on the cheek, and got up and left.

Less than a minute later, Ginny burst into the room, ran to the bed, and hugged him tightly as she sat next to him. "I wanted to come running right up behind you after you left," she said, "but Dad asked me not to. He said it would be better for you to have some time to sort out your thoughts by yourself, and I think he wanted Mum to be the first one to talk to you, so she could apologize without my having spent all that time telling you how right you were. Which you were, of course, she shouldn't have done that. It was funny, something about the way she looked made me ask her that question about who would have sent your aunt the articles; I just had this sudden feeling it was her, so I asked to see how she would react. Was it Legilimency that told you it was her?"

He nodded. "I didn't even mean to do it. I just got this image of her with a newspaper. When he was teaching me, Albus did say that you're more likely to do it unconsciously in emotionally charged situations, but that was the first time it ever happened like that."

"I guess I'll have to remember not to lie to you in emotionally charged situations in the future," she joked. Turning more serious, she added, "We all felt really bad for you," and he understood that she was referring to the other four of their group. "Mum gets kind of pushy sometimes and she can't see it, like how she was at first with the twins and their shop. She was stepping on a sensitive spot for you, and she didn't realize it."

"I wish it wasn't a sensitive spot," he said, sounding unhappy with himself. "I wish I could just not let it bother me. It usually doesn't unless someone brings it up, but I wish it didn't at all."

She took both his hands in hers. “That’s way too much to expect of yourself. I know you’ve heard this before, but it really is true: it’s amazing that you came out of that childhood as well as you did. Most people would be permanently damaged, have huge self-esteem problems, be bitter or withdrawn. You have your problems, but they’re close to the kind of problems most people have. Considering what you went through, it speaks well of you that you don’t hate your aunt and uncle with a fiery passion. None of us would blame you if you did.”

“There were times when I did,” he admitted, and she gripped his hands harder. “I guess you just get used to some things. Like Voldemort trying to kill me all the time.”

She let go of his hands and hugged him again. “My poor Harry, you’ve had such a hard life...”

“Well, it got a lot better about four months ago,” he said. “And after he’s gone, it’ll be much, much better. I do think that’ll happen, and then we can have normal lives.”

She looked at him proudly. “I think so too. You’ll find a way to beat him.”

He smiled at her confidence. “And then, my biggest problem will be trying to deal with my childhood,” he said, half-joking. “Or, ignore it. And trying to teach the energy of love. But those sound like pretty good problems right now.”

* * * * *

The next day, a Saturday, was another quiet one for Harry; he had a fly with Ron, practiced dueling with Neville, and sat around doing nothing with Ginny in the morning. After lunch, he spent some time sitting in a conjured chair outside and reading the Hogwarts rule book, and found that his eyes started to close occasionally as he did so. When he finished, he was halfway through the book, but he wasn’t sure how much he would remember. He hoped McGonagall wouldn’t quiz him on it, but he had a feeling she would.

His hand tingled, and he held it up. He remembered with a little sadness that he used to smile every time it did, and he still did sometimes, but it had happened enough that by now his usual reaction was to be curious as to why Ginny was calling him. “Could you come in for a minute?” she asked. He nodded, and headed to the front door.

Stepping inside, he was very surprised to see a familiar sight: all ten of his Slytherin first-year students, soon to be second years. “Hello, Professor,” they greeted him, almost in chorus.

He grinned broadly, very pleased to see them. “Wow, what a surprise,” he said, as he sat on the sofa to be closer to their eye level. “What are you doing here?”

“We’re visiting Pansy,” said a smiling Helen, glancing up at Pansy, who was standing behind the sofa. “Of course, this way we get to visit you too, but she explained to us that we can’t come over here to visit you, because it wouldn’t look good to the other first years, and they would ask you why you had us over but not them. But Pansy’s a student, not a teacher, so we can visit her if we want.”

“And it just so happens that you live here too,” added a girl named Sylvia.

“Very convenient,” said Harry, still smiling.

“We thought so,” agreed Augustina. “And besides, David and Andrea started telling the other first years as soon as they got back from your birthday party. We were jealous, we wanted to come too.”

“Sorry, that was Hermione and I,” said Ginny. “Harry didn’t know about it, of course, and we had to decide who to invite. We knew Harry would want to see all of you, but there was the problem of it looking like you were his favorites, and we couldn’t have forty people over. We invited David and Andrea because their brothers were invited, and it seemed wrong not to invite them too. But we wanted to invite you.”

“We know,” said Hedrick. “They knew that, they told us that was why they were invited. But we get to be here now, anyway. Visiting Pansy,” he added with a

smile. Looking up at her, he quickly added, “We would want to do that, anyway, of course.”

Everyone laughed, especially Pansy. “Nice of you to add that, Hedrick. I mean, I don’t mind being an excuse to visit Harry, but I hope you want to see me, too.”

“We do, obviously,” Augustina assured her. “He’s just being kind of dumb. One of those things boys do sometimes, we think.”

Harry saw Pansy form a new smile, and start to speak. “Don’t say it,” he said quickly, pointing a finger at her. The Slytherins laughed again as Pansy feigned wounded innocence. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Yeah, right,” said Harry. “I’m not dumb. At least not right this second.”

“Oh, Professor,” said Augustina earnestly, “are you going to teach us how to use the energy of love this year?”

Harry sighed. “Well,” he said wearily, “everyone else I’ve met this summer has asked, so I suppose I shouldn’t—” He cut himself off as Slytherins started laughing and looking at Pansy, who was laughing as well.

“We know,” said Augustina, smiling. “Pansy told us to ask you.”

Trying not to smile, he looked back at Pansy, who leaned forward against the back of the sofa and playfully ran a hand through his hair to mess it up. “Fortunately, you like it that I tease you. You have said that before, haven’t you?”

Now he couldn’t help but smile. “Unfortunately, yes. I assume you already told them that I haven’t decided?”

“Yes, I did. But I talked to them for a while before you came in, they’ve been here for a half hour. I explained that you can’t teach just them, for the same reason you can’t have them over. But I can, so I’m going to try to teach them. It’s not favoritism, since I’m a student and they’re students.”

Harry raised his eyebrows, impressed. “That’s a good idea, I hadn’t thought of that. No, there’s no reason you can’t, you could certainly teach it as well as I could.”

She looked taken aback at his expression of confidence. “I don’t know about that, but I’ll do my best. And even if you can’t officially teach it, you can visit from time to time and give us advice.”

“I suppose there wouldn’t be anything wrong with that,” he agreed. “Have you given them all the warnings?”

“I think so... that it’s hard, it might take a long time, it could get embarrassing, that we don’t know everything about it. That’s pretty much it, right?”

“That’s about it,” he said, looking the Slytherins over. “All that doesn’t bother you?”

Helen shook her head. “We’re really happy that she’s willing to try, we know it might not work, or might take a long time. I think the boys are kind of scared of the whole embarrassment thing, though.”

“We are not!” protested David Septus, a little too vehemently, Harry thought. He looked at David seriously and said, “You know, David, I’ve told Ron that I love him, directly to his face.” He paused, watching David’s eyes go wide. “Still not scared?”

“Okay, maybe a little,” admitted David as the girls giggled. “But we still want to do it.”

“That’s very brave of you,” said Harry, half-seriously. “Just don’t get discouraged, and don’t expect it to happen by any particular time.” Turning to Pansy, he asked, “Is this going to be secret, or open?”

“Secret is probably best, I think,” she said. “Even though there’s nothing wrong with it, I’d rather everyone didn’t know, because then they’ll be asking questions, maybe being jealous, that kind of thing. I was thinking we’d have the sessions in the boys’ dormitory, though I’m not sure how we’d get the girls in there without anyone noticing. Maybe I could get Hermione to teach me that Disillusionment spell that Kingsley taught her. I’m sure we can work something out.”

“I would think they could just go in there openly, nobody would think it was so strange,” suggested Harry, as some Slytherins nodded in agreement. “Everyone knows they’re close. Anyway, were you going to start today?”

Pansy nodded, but Helen spoke first. “And we already know what to do a little, since you’re teaching my Dad, and he’s told me about it.”

Hedrick looked at Helen in obvious mock surprise. “Professor Potter is teaching your father? Really? When did that happen?” As Helen gave him a dirty look, Hedrick said to Harry, “She’s only mentioned it about twenty times.”

Harry smiled. To Helen, he said, “Well, I’m glad you’re excited about it.” Helen turned to Hedrick with a superior ‘so there’ look. Harry stayed with them for another hour, talking and then helping Pansy start them on their first session. Finally he left, going up to the girls’ bedroom to meet Hermione for their Legilimency practice.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said.

She shook her head, dismissing his apology. “Pansy told me she was going to surprise you with the first years, so I wasn’t expecting you. I’ve been keeping busy.”

“Yes, I see that,” he agreed, taking in the three open Transfigurations texts on the bed. “Ready to get started?”

“Okay, just a minute,” she said. She cleared the books off the bed, and they sat on beds opposite each other. They had recently been spending half of the sessions working on Hermione’s Legilimency skills so that she could eventually test Harry’s Occlumency skills, but she had not yet managed to get into Harry’s mind, even though he was putting up no barriers. After ten minutes of trying, however, Hermione managed it for the first time. Harry saw various images of love flash through his mind, most involving Ginny.

He smiled as she withdrew from his mind. “Congratulations,” he said.

“Thanks,” she said, smiling as well. “Boy, that’s not easy.”

“I know, I remember how hard it was the first time,” he agreed. “You should keep doing it, for as long as you can before you get too tired. The more you do it now, the easier it’ll be to remember how it felt the next time we do it.” She agreed, and she kept it up, looking first for images of love, then ten minutes later, focusing on the idea of friendship, as Harry explained how to search for specific types of emotions associated with particular memories. He saw mostly memories of his friendship with her and Ron, and a few later ones involving Ginny, Pansy, and Neville.

She switched focus again, now looking for memories associated with feelings of pride. Harry saw himself snatching the golden egg from under the Hungarian Horntail and seeing the crowd applaud wildly. He saw himself watch Ginny successfully use his Cruciatus Curse shield for the first time. He saw himself being awarded sixty points at the end of his first year, helping Gryffindor win the House Cup. He saw Dumbledore single out Pansy for praise before the final Quidditch match a few months ago. He saw Ginny, standing before him in his Hogwarts quarters, let her robes drop at her feet, himself gaping in shock, then getting up and covering her with his robe. Hermione gave a start when she saw it, but didn’t recoil or do anything unusual, letting the memory play out naturally as she did the others. She withdrew from his mind, and smiled ruefully. “One of the reasons I chose pride was that I thought it would be safe, like friendship, that I wouldn’t see anything like that. Of course, now that I’ve seen it, it makes perfect sense; she was doing something dramatic to get you both past your inhibitions, and you were proud of her for being brave enough to do it. You don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to, but... I assume that was just before your first time?”

He nodded, surprised that he wasn’t more embarrassed than he was. “After she did that, it just didn’t seem so difficult, all of a sudden. I’m sure I couldn’t have done it.”

“I think I understand a little how you felt when you saw that thing with Neville and I,” she said. “I’m not that embarrassed, but a little. Partly for the

obvious reason, but also because it was an important and really personal moment for both of you, something that really, no one else should see. But I have to say, it was a really nice moment. You said just the right thing.”

He shrugged. “I just said what I thought. About the other thing, I suppose in a way you’re right, but it doesn’t bother me, probably because it’s you, and I think it won’t bother Ginny either. I guess we’re so used to the idea that anything could be seen by Snape that you seeing it doesn’t seem like such a big deal.”

“Has he seen it?” she asked. “This particular one?”

“No, he hasn’t seen anything like that.”

“Really? I would have thought he was bound to, by now.”

“He’s very skilled with this, he can pretty much see exactly what he wants; nothing he sees is by accident, like with us,” explained Harry. “I think it’s partly because he’s been going through my childhood, and as he gets closer to the present, he’s been slowing down, looking in more detail. But he has covered recent days where Ginny and I have done stuff, and he knows we’re doing it, but he skips it. It could be because he’s more interested in knowing what’s happening and he can find out from me, but I also think he’s deliberately waiting to look at anything like that. I think he wants to give us as much time as possible to get used to... doing sexual things before he views them. What?” he asked as she broke into a smile.

“Sorry, it’s just that Ginny’s told Pansy and I that you get embarrassed at the mention of that word, and you did just then. I don’t mean to tease you about it, I just couldn’t help smiling, it was cute.”

He shook his head. “It’s a good thing that I’ve already gotten used to the idea that I’m not going to have the kind of privacy about this kind of thing that most people have.”

He meant the comment to be humorous, but Hermione looked concerned. “Does it bother you that Ginny told us that?”

“No, not really,” he said. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said that, that way. I mean, I don’t talk about that kind of thing with Ron and Neville, but I know that

girls talk about stuff like that that guys don't. Really, it doesn't bother me, I guess it's the whole situation, how strange it is. I mean, usually nobody else would see what you just saw, but besides you, Snape will probably see it eventually, and Skeeter saw it, too. It's just strange."

Hermione's mouth opened in realization. "That was what she meant... I didn't get it, what she said, about she didn't want to see that..." Hermione alternated between expressions of disgust and sympathy for Harry. "No wonder you were so mad... what a despicable thing to say. Well..." She trailed off again, now looking sad. "And now, the thought that goes through my head is, well, at least she's dead now, and some part of me still feels that she deserved it, and then I get back to that whole thing. I'm still wrestling with this, as you can tell. Even a week later, it's still hard not to be satisfied that she's dead. She was so awful."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wish there was something I could do."

"I know. But all you can do is be supportive, which you have done, and I appreciate it. I just have to fight with this. Anyway, let's get back to it. I assume it's still safe to go with pride, nothing else like that is going to come up?"

"No, I don't think so, I think that was kind of an exception. It should be all right. But even if you did stumble across something, I'd deal with it." He paused, thinking. "I wonder if this is why Legilimency isn't exactly a common skill, because teaching and practicing requires such a... giving up your privacy, most people aren't going to want to do it."

"That, and it's pretty hard," Hermione agreed. "From what I read, most people can't do it, it requires a certain amount of magical power. I probably couldn't do it if I weren't using the energy of love. Oh, I was wondering... can you look for memories associated with a certain person? I was thinking that if I looked for things just about me, I wouldn't find anything sexual."

"I've never tried that, but you should be able to do it. But really, you shouldn't worry about seeing sexual stuff. I think the one time it's happened with each of us has been a real fluke, and that most of the time that's not going to come

up unless you're trying to see it. I mean, I've done this with you plenty over the past month, and nothing has come up. I just don't think it's going to."

She nodded and resumed practicing. After five minutes, she paused. "There's something in there that... feels strange, is the best way I can put it. It feels like there's a barrier there, even though I know you're not putting up one. Maybe it's my imagination, since this is the first time I've gotten this far, but somehow I don't think so. Hold on, let me check something."

Hermione reached into her trunk and pulled out a book, obviously a Hogwarts library book, on Legilimency. She spent a minute flipping through it, then a few minutes reading. She looked up at Harry with surprise and concern. "Harry... I can't be certain, but the book describes what I encountered almost exactly. I think someone's done a Memory Charm on you."

Harry stared at her, stunned. "Are you... I was going to say 'are you sure,' but you just said you're not." He started wondering who would have done it, and he found that Hermione was wondering too.

"If this is what it is, it was probably a Dark wizard, maybe Voldemort. Maybe even Malfoy, if he was able to take you by surprise."

"I have to find out what it is," said Harry firmly. "How do you break a Memory Charm?"

"I'm not sure, this book doesn't cover that. We'd have to go to the Hogwarts library, the books in the Restricted section must have information on that. But something else just occurred to me... I almost hate to suggest this, but what if this was done by someone friendly, for your own good, or protection? What if you saw something awful or disturbing, and, let's say, an Auror or Dumbledore did this to help you? You could have even agreed to it, for all we know."

Harry found the thought itself disturbing. "I don't think of myself as the type to agree to having a Memory Charm, but I understand that there could be circumstances I couldn't imagine. Still, I have to know. If it was you, you'd want to know, you couldn't rest until you knew."

“I suppose so,” she reluctantly agreed. “The bright side is that if we break it, and it turns out it was there for a good reason, we can just have it put back and I would know not to mention it in the future. I guess it’s off to the library.” Fawkes appeared, and they held onto each other and grasped his tail.

Hermione quickly found the relevant books, and they sat down and each looked through one. After twenty minutes, Hermione said, “Okay, this one has it, and it’s good news; we should be able to do it. Breaking a Memory Charm yourself is easier than someone else trying to do it, and completely safe. There’s only one catch: you have to be stronger than whoever did it to you. Fortunately, in your case, that’s not a problem.”

“What do I have to do?” he asked.

“We,” she corrected him. “Someone has to help, and it has to be a Legilimens. Even though I’m just a beginner, I can do what needs to be done. Here, read this section, it explains what you have to do.”

He read, and found that he had to focus a certain kind of mental energy in a certain direction. Hermione would be focusing on the area of his mind where the Memory Charm was, in a sense guiding him to the proper spot. The book said that it could take anywhere from a few minutes to a half hour, so Harry was prepared to be patient. He found that he was tense, wondering what he might find. He reconsidered whether to do it, but only for a moment. He knew himself well enough to know that he had to know, he couldn’t accept not knowing. “Okay, I’m ready,” he said.

She cast Legilimens on him, and looked around again. “I have it, you can go ahead,” she said. Harry focused the mental energy as directed by the book, trying to shut out all other thoughts. To his surprise, in less than a minute he could start to feel the memory awaken, and he wondered if it was faster than expected because he was using the energy of love. The memory started to come into focus.

Harry was sitting in his usual chair in Snape’s office, later the same day of Skeeter’s visit to the Burrow. Snape viewed memories of the events of the last

twenty-four hours since the previous session. Snape glossed over Harry's shift with the Aurors, as there had been no Apparation attempts, and started viewing his and Hermione's meeting with Skeeter. He viewed all of it, then cast Legilimens on Harry again, and viewed it again. He sat silently for a minute, deep in thought. "What is it?" Harry saw himself ask Snape. Snape didn't answer. He waved his wand at Harry, whose eyes suddenly looked glazed. Feeling the memory, Harry realized that it was a Confundus Curse, to disorient him. Snape walked to a shelf, and produced a pair of scissors and a small jar. He approached Harry and cut off a small amount of hair from the left side of Harry's head, letting the hair fall into the jar. He performed another spell, and said to Harry, "The Apparation crisis will soon be over, and it would be nice for you and Ginny to celebrate. Perhaps at a restaurant such as the Golden Dragon in Diagon Alley. You deserve to enjoy yourselves, and you should not be cowed into never going out in public. Friday at seven-thirty would be a good time." He waved his wand again, first lifting the Confundus Charm, then applying the Memory Charm. He then resumed viewing memories of Harry's fourth year at Hogwarts.

In the Hogwarts library Harry sat silently, dumbfounded. He looked at an astonished Hermione. "You saw it?" he asked.

Eyes wide, she nodded. "You should call Ginny, have Fawkes bring her. She needs to know this."

He slowly nodded, still stunned by what he had seen. He lifted his hand and looked into his palm. She smiled, but he didn't return her smile. "Could you join us? Fawkes'll be there for you."

"Yeah, okay, he's here," she said. A few seconds later, she and Fawkes appeared. Taking in their expressions, she asked, "What happened?"

"We just found out," he said heavily, "that Snape killed Skeeter." She, too, was astonished. "He was never a suspect because I thought he didn't know about her blackmail threats, but I was wrong. I said he didn't view my memories of our meeting with Skeeter. He did view them, took a few hairs from me, then did a

Memory Charm on me.” To Hermione, he asked, “What was that other one he did, the one about the Golden Dragon?”

“I’ve heard of it, but never seen it done,” she answered. “It’s called a Suggestion Charm. It’s not like the Imperius Curse, because you’re not making them do something, you’re just giving them the idea, and they don’t remember that you’ve done it. It has to be something the person might have done anyway, if they had thought of it.” To Ginny, she explained, “He did that to Harry, suggested that you and he go to the Golden Dragon, even suggested the day and time you ended up going.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Ginny quietly.

“Obviously, he was setting it up so you wouldn’t be implicated, which was one of the possibilities we talked about after it happened,” said Hermione. “And he wouldn’t be suspected, because only we would know there was even a chance of his finding out this way, and it didn’t occur to any of us that he would do this.”

Ginny looked at Harry with obvious concern. “How do you feel about this? What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know what to think,” he said slowly. “I guess I have this feeling of... being taken advantage of, somehow. I feel as though I should be morally outraged that he would kill someone like that, in cold blood... maybe I’m just too surprised right now, but I don’t feel that. I know he has no conscience, so I’m not surprised that he could do it. I would feel guilty that what he did helped us, but I know he didn’t do it to help us, that it was because of the information she had. It’s like, I can play both sides of the conversation we’ll have about this. He’ll say it had to be done, and I’ll say that killing is wrong. We already had a conversation a lot like it. He may even say that it was better that he did it because he spared McGonagall, who does have a conscience, the decision of whether to do it or not. And she would say that it was her decision to make, and that he shouldn’t have done it without consulting her, which he obviously did.”

“Very perceptive, Harry,” said McGonagall, walking into the library. “That is indeed almost exactly the conversation we had. But as I’m sure you know, his main intent was not to spare me the decision, but to serve the Order by doing something that to him clearly needed to be done.” She sat at the table with them, addressing Harry. “I have been eavesdropping for the past few minutes, for which I apologize, but I wanted to know how you felt before talking to you about this. It was not that helpful, as it seems you yourself do not know how you feel. I can certainly understand. Professor Snape will be unable to sympathize with how this must make you feel, but I do, for what little consolation that may be to you.”

Harry was silent. “How did you know we were here?” asked Hermione.

“I placed a movement detection charm on the books which explain how Memory Charms are broken, knowing that if anyone tried to access them, it would be you. Professor Snape did as well, as he wanted to know when you broke through the Charm. He knew you would at some point.”

“How long have you known?” asked Hermione.

“He told me soon after he did it; I believe it was a half hour after I finished talking to you that night.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” asked Harry, a definite accusation in his tone and his eyes.

She looked uncomfortable. “I very seriously considered it. I obviously do not condone what he did, either Skeeter’s murder or the Memory Charm, and you did deserve to know. But it was already done, and I could see no benefit in telling you immediately. You and your friends were recovering from a trying time, and it seemed better that you have time to recover, not to have one more thing over which to wrestle with the moral implications. In particular, I did not wish to tell you but ask you not to tell Hermione, and she had already had a difficult enough week. Like Professor Snape, I knew you would find the Memory Charm eventually.”

Harry was inclined not to accept any explanation she gave, but what she said about Hermione made him think again. Had he been told the day after it

happened, he knew he wouldn't have told Hermione, and he had been through a lot too; if he could justify not telling her, McGonagall could justify not telling him. Even so, part of him was angry with McGonagall anyway, while the rational part told him to think of events as a member of the Order, not as a teenager whose feelings had been hurt.

Confused and overwhelmed, he bowed his head, resting it in his hands. Ginny got up and moved her chair next to his, sat down, and put an arm around him, moving her hand across his back. He looked up to see McGonagall give Ginny a reproving look. Ginny glared back at McGonagall, her protective instincts obviously aroused; Harry knew that she was letting McGonagall know that she would comfort Harry regardless of what McGonagall thought of it. McGonagall sighed lightly and looked away, conceding the silent argument. He gratefully reached for Ginny's free hand, not caring what McGonagall thought either.

Hermione spoke again; Harry wondered whether she was asking questions so he could get more information, as he seemed to be in no frame of mind to ask questions. "Why was it necessary for him to assume Harry's appearance? Couldn't he have just made himself invisible and broken into her place?"

"He could have, but he judged that the best chance for there to be no mishaps was to assume the identity of someone she would not turn away from her door," McGonagall explained. "It would also have the advantage of making it appear that the attack was sponsored by Voldemort. It was crucial to him that he take her by surprise; had she managed to get off a scream or any sort of warning, he would have had to leave hastily, and there were things he wanted to accomplish before leaving. For example, he wanted to find out who, if anyone, she had told, and whether she had written down any highly sensitive information."

Hermione went pale. "He didn't... torture her?"

"No, fortunately," said McGonagall, looking relieved that she didn't have to give an affirmative answer. "He was able to retrieve the information using Legilimency. She had not told anyone. She had written things down, in the draft of

the book she was working on. He was able to locate the materials and dispose of them.”

“After disposing of her,” said Harry sullenly.

She regarded him tolerantly. “I have already said that I do not approve of what he did. I feel that killing is a last resort, not a first resort. But it must not be overlooked that his actions may have saved our cause, saved thousands of lives. She was unbalanced, she could have said anything to anyone. It was not his decision to make, but it was a reasonable decision.”

Harry’s face was a mask, expressionless. “I’d rather that kind of decision was made by someone with a conscience. If we kill someone, we should at least suffer for it.”

She met his gaze. “He suffered, Harry. Not from an attack of conscience, but he suffered. You can be sure of that.”

“You mean, in kind of the same way he did by doing the Cruciatus Curse on me in the demonstration last year.”

She nodded. “Yes, but worse. In any case, I do agree, Harry. I would rather have made the decision myself. I do not wish to abandon all morality because our enemies have done so. He simply felt that this unquestionably needed to be done.”

Harry closed his eyes, then opened them again; his face now reflected his turmoil. “Part of the point of this is that I’m supposed to care about him, to want to help him. That was going all right, I felt like I was getting somewhere. But how am I supposed to feel that way now? He just...”

The rest looked at him sympathetically. “I cannot answer that, Harry,” said McGonagall. “I understand how you feel, as well as I can without actually being in your position. I can only suggest that you try to look at this situation from his point of view as best you can.”

She stood to leave. “He wished you to come see him after you found out. Not for a session; he understands that you will need to take some time to process

this information. He wishes to discuss a few things with you.” McGonagall turned and left.

Harry turned to Hermione and Ginny. “I’d really rather not see him just this moment.”

“I can understand that,” said Hermione quietly. “Are you not going to?”

Harry wondered if this was an indication of Hermione trying to change her character after the Skeeter trial; he would normally have expected her to tell him that he should do it. “No, I guess I should,” he said reluctantly. “I was going to say, maybe he’ll tell me something that’ll change the way I see this, but I somehow doubt it. He killed a person, and maybe he didn’t have to...”

“He had to,” said Ginny, to Harry and Hermione’s surprise. “I don’t like it any more than you do, you know that. But if Skeeter released that information, we could have lost Snape and had Voldemort find out all kinds of stuff. Even if Skeeter had truthfully said that she wasn’t going to tell anyone, she could have always changed her mind.”

“She still could have been given a Memory Charm,” argued Harry.

“And suppose Voldemort decided to grab her to grill her for information about you?” responded Ginny. “He could have read the article, figured out that it was at least possible that she’d spent time as a beetle around you and gathered some interesting information, and thought it was a good idea to grab her and see what she knew. If that happened, the Memory Charm wouldn’t matter.”

“McGonagall said last week that if she was convinced that Skeeter didn’t plan on telling anyone, she would have let her live,” pointed out Harry.

“And Albus would definitely have let her live, no matter what, he wouldn’t have killed her or condoned it,” said Hermione. “But Ginny’s point is still valid, it’s just a matter of how many chances you’re willing to take for the sake of doing the moral thing. Look at the chances Albus was willing to take last year, chances we wouldn’t have taken. One of them would’ve gotten you killed if not for Snape. One got Pansy tortured. I mean, murder is wrong, but in this kind of situation... I’m not

saying I would've agreed with what Snape did... well, I would have, but for all the wrong reasons." She glanced down, obviously unhappy with herself. "But with so many lives at stake, it's not that simple. There's a lot to what Ginny's saying."

Harry briefly wondered whether they were making the arguments to help mitigate the discomfort he felt at what Snape had done, but he couldn't deny that they were valid points. He also knew that McGonagall and Kingsley, both of whom he considered to be moral people, would have killed her under certain circumstances.

"Well, I'd better get this over with," he said. "I don't know how long this will take, but would you both mind waiting for me, in my quarters? I have a feeling I'm going to need to talk about it afterwards, and I may not be able to at the Burrow."

"Of course," said Hermione, as Ginny nodded. They got up and left the library together.

CHAPTER 8

Snape's Reward

Harry walked into Snape's office, the door already open. He sat in his usual chair. Frustrated, he said, "I wanted to come in here ranting about how murder is wrong, and how could you kill someone just like that, and so on."

Again, Snape seemed to be trying hard to keep his emotions in check. "I half expected you to," he said evenly.

Harry grunted. "It's nice to be able to exceed your expectations. I won't pretend I'm not upset, but obviously you expected that as well." Snape nodded slightly, saying nothing. Harry continued, "I've talked to McGonagall, and Hermione and Ginny. I know what you did, and I understand why you did it. I understand all the arguments for killing her, and there'd be no point debating it with you. But you did a Memory Charm on me without my consent, and you manipulated me to go to the restaurant. What I want to know is, how am I supposed to sit here in the future and trust you? How do I know you won't do something similar in the future? I have to be able to trust you, to do this."

Snape seemed to repress a reaction, then paused a few seconds before answering Harry's question. "What you may trust, Professor, is that I will take any and all actions necessary to ensure the defeat of the Dark Lord. There is nothing more than that which I can tell you, and nothing more which is important."

Harry didn't respond directly, as Snape's response, again, was expected. "I also thought that you would consider what you learned from us doing this as something not to be repeated, or acted on. Do you not think of it that way, or did you just consider this situation an exception?"

“I accept it as a general principle,” responded Snape, “but of course circumstances may force actions different from generally accepted ones. As the headmistress has already told you, it was highly negligent of you not to report Skeeter’s threats immediately. Every day that passed was another day containing a risk that Skeeter would reveal what she knew, or be abducted by the Dark Lord. I am surprised that that did not occur to you as a possibility.”

“Ginny just made that argument a few minutes ago,” Harry acknowledged. “She said that from your point of view, there simply wasn’t any choice but to do what you did.”

Snape raised his eyebrows. “It seems that Miss Weasley is more intelligent and perceptive than I gave her credit for. Yes, there was no choice. It was difficult enough to wait for the two days required to arrange circumstances so that there would be no doubt of your lack of involvement; I was greatly concerned that the Dark Lord would take action before your visit to the restaurant. I reluctantly took that risk, understanding that your standing in the community is important in its own way to our cause.

“I knew you would be dismayed by my actions, but I felt that you would at some level understand the necessity of it, and would eventually ‘get past’ your emotional reaction. In any event, I could not allow that to be a consideration in what I did. I asked you that ‘hypothetical’ question about Mr. Shacklebolt in the hope that you would think carefully about the issues involved, in anticipation of the day you discovered what had been done.”

“Well, that worked too,” said Harry, making no attempt to hide his annoyance. “I would probably have had a worse reaction than this if I hadn’t thought about it so much.”

“You do have the capacity to learn, if you apply yourself,” said Snape. Harry looked at him sharply, wondering if he was being mocked. Deciding he wasn’t, he settled down as Snape continued. “Your moral concerns still prevent you from seeing the necessity more clearly. I strongly suspect that Miss Weasley sees it more

clearly because she quite properly equates the success of the struggle against the Dark Lord with your personal survival, and would take or authorize any action necessary to your survival, placing that ahead of her notions of morality. If you lost one of your group of friends to this fight, as you nearly lost Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom, your attitudes regarding this might change.”

Harry found himself wondering if that was true, and whether he should change his attitudes now in the hopes of preventing it from happening, or try harder not to condone killing even if it did happen. He wondered if Snape knew that was his worst fear; Snape had not yet seen the boggart assume Pansy’s form in his memories.

“Maybe I shouldn’t ask this,” said Harry, “but I will anyway, I feel like I have to know. Did you enjoy killing her?”

Snape’s first reaction was a smirk, which went away quickly; Harry wondered if that was on purpose. “You wish to judge me, or to decide whether to judge me. Lacking the ability to judge me against a standard of morality, and knowing that my decision was a rational one, you look for other ways to judge my behavior.”

“Maybe I am,” Harry admitted, “but I want to make a positive judgment. I want to be able to say, he did it only because he thought he had to, there was nothing else in it for him, nothing else that made him lean toward killing her.”

“I am doing my best to be tolerant, Professor, but my patience is wearing thin,” said Snape, tone still even. “The fact that my decision was rationally correct should be sufficient to assuage whatever concerns you may have. However, I will indulge you, and answer your question.

“Did I enjoy it? Of course I did. I might as well ask you if you enjoyed yourself after a session of sexual activity with Miss Weasley. For one who has been... modified as I have, to kill is the greatest pleasure one can experience; it is somewhat analogous to sexual release. Now, would I have wished to kill her, or anyone, even without a good reason? No, I would not. Even though it is pleasurable

in the moment, it exacts a toll on someone such as myself who resists such pleasures. You may recall that I requested your presence for five consecutive days after Skeeter was killed. This was because such a thing... leads me further into temptation, one could say. My daily life is a continuing effort to resist such pleasures, all the more difficult as they are the only ones available to me. I prefer not to kill, though obviously not as a matter of morality. It is more in the way that an alcoholic resists alcohol.

“Now, before I continue, there is something else I should inform you of, as it has a connection to your question. You assumed, correctly, that the Dark Lord commissioned the murder of Fudge. What you did not know was that it was I who was selected to carry out the act.”

Harry gaped. Killing someone like Skeeter was bad enough, but Fudge hadn't been a threat, or done anything immoral as Skeeter had. “And you did it?” Snape nodded. “You couldn't have avoided it somehow...” As he said it, Harry knew it sounded stupid, but he was still shocked.

“Oh, yes,” said Snape airily, “I am sure the Dark Lord would have listened to a well-reasoned argument. Perhaps I could have persuaded him that Fudge wasn't such a bad fellow. *Think!*” Snape nearly shouted. “The moment the Dark Lord decided to have him killed, Fudge was as good as dead. Were it not I, it would have been someone else. Moreover, any reluctance of my part to do as he asked would have been highly suspicious, and endangered my status as having his confidence. You can surely understand that; you correctly judged Fudge's importance to be so low as to not be worth even a small risk to the lives of your friends. Equally, it was not worth the greater risk to my services to the Order for me to do anything but what he asked.

“Now, Professor... here is the irony, though I do not know whether you will be able to appreciate it. The Dark Lord chose me to kill Fudge as a reward.” Harry's eyes went wide as Snape continued. “He had been pleased with my recent services, such as ‘stealing’ the false prophecy from the headmaster's Pensieve, and informing

him of Miss Granger's being involved in a plot against him. Obviously, the events connected with that did not go well for him, but he did not hold me responsible. He considered that I had done my job well, and events beyond my control—his sudden unconsciousness—were responsible for the less than satisfactory end to that sequence of events. Considering that it was the Minister of Magic who was to be killed, it was a plum assignment, to be given only to one who was greatly in favor.”

Harry had gotten over his shock, understanding that the situation that Snape was in didn't allow for much flexibility of action. “I bet they'd love to kill me.”

“Indeed, it is understood that the one who manages it will achieve an exalted status,” confirmed Snape. “In fact, the Dark Lord has made an exception to his usual policy of not allowing actions not previously approved; if someone feels they have a good chance to kill you, they need not seek his specific approval to attempt it.”

Harry rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I suppose that's a compliment.”

“A high compliment,” said Snape, “and a measure of the Dark Lord's desperation. In any case, the irony is that of all Death Eaters, I was the only one who would have actually preferred not to carry out the act. However, I did, because there was no real alternative. If you search your recollections, you will find that I requested your presence for five consecutive days at that time as well, starting with the night Fudge had died. It had been my intention to call on you as little as possible during the Apparation struggle, but after having killed, I could not hold off. The headmaster explained to you that any such action on my part means that I require the support you provide all the more, to offset the impulses such actions cause.”

Harry gazed ahead, his thoughts jumbled. “I guess it's just hard for me to understand. It's such a different world that you live in when you deal with Death Eaters, what you have to deal with every day. I know I can't use normal standards of moral behavior with you. I don't know what to think.”

Snape nodded. “Understandable, as my experience is substantially different from anything you know, or are used to. The headmaster told you that he did Legilimens on me from time to time, to check on my emotional state; I think the time has come that it is a good idea for you to do so.”

“Why?” asked Harry, very surprised.

“Because it is my emotional state that is of particular interest to you right now,” Snape explained. “Because he did so, the headmaster understood my emotional state, and I believe this was helpful to him. Especially in circumstances such as this, I believe it will be helpful to you as well.”

Harry could see Snape’s point, but he was still surprised. “Okay. What should I look for?”

“It will assist you if I actively recollect the memory as you cast the spell,” said Snape. “The first one will be from this morning, as I read the Prophet over breakfast. I suggest it because it is very ordinary; it will give you a baseline, a point for comparison to anything else you see.”

Nodding, Harry took out his wand. He cast the Legilimens spell, and focused on trying to access Snape’s mind. He got in effortlessly, and found the memory immediately, due to Snape’s help, he was sure.

Snape was sitting at a table in his quarters, which were as spartan as his office. His breakfast was sausage, eggs, toast, and orange juice. He was reading an article about who would be the next Minister of Magic, titled “Bright Future For Rudolphus Seen As Field of Contenders Narrows To Two.” Harry recognized the article as the one Hermione had read him a little of that morning.

What Harry noticed most of all, however, was the emotional atmosphere that pervaded the scene. ‘Dismal’ was the first word to come to Harry’s mind. Harry imagined that this would be how he would feel if nothing good had happened for years and years, and never would again. He remembered feeling something similar sometimes when he was a child living at 4 Privet Drive, but nowhere near this strongly. The breakfast felt the same, the newspaper, the plans for the day... even if

something interesting happened, it wouldn't be anything good. Good things weren't possible, because they interfered with what needed to be done: the Dark Lord had to be defeated.

Harry viewed the memory for about a minute before withdrawing. His eyes widened a little as he looked at Snape. That's what it's like for you? asked Harry silently. That's normal? Harry associated the feelings he had experienced with profound... it felt like being depressed; different, but similar. Worse, in the sense that it would never go away.

"The next one is ready, when you are," said Snape. "It is a week ago Saturday, in the afternoon, just after my session with you. It was the first time I saw the Dark Lord after Skeeter's death."

Harry waved his wand, and saw Snape standing in front of a door. Harry could feel Snape organize his thoughts, asserting total control of his mind. He felt Snape feel adrenaline rushing through him. Snape concentrated, then opened the door and entered the room.

Voldemort was standing in the middle of the room, his expression as Harry remembered it: haughty and cold, as if the presence of others was a thing to barely be tolerated. Snape stopped a few feet away from Voldemort, knelt, and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes. He then retreated a step and stood. "My Lord," he said; Harry wondered if the words were part of the ritual that included kissing the robes.

"Snape," said Voldemort casually, with an air of indifference. "Have you heard about the death of the Skeeter woman?"

"Yes, my Lord. McGonagall informed me this morning."

Voldemort looked at Snape, seemingly looking through him. "It must have been very annoying that she managed to escape you when you dispatched Fudge."

"Yes, my Lord, it was. I apologize again for my failure—"

Voldemort waved a hand magnanimously. "You did not know she was an Animagus, nor did most of us. The young Malfoy should have been more forthcoming with information he should have known would be of assistance. 'Oh, I

forgot,” said Voldemort mockingly, rolling his eyes. “He will not forget next time, I am sure, once he returns to us. I will have to be more careful about accepting those who are too young.” He looked at Snape again with the same penetrating gaze. “It would be understandable, Snape, if you decided to take a little initiative regarding the Skeeter woman. One does not like to leave loose ends.”

“Indeed not, my Lord. I would have been pleased to do so, but of course I would not—”

“Have done so without my instructions, yes,” interrupted Voldemort lazily. “It is at times like this that it occurs to me what a skilled Occlumens you are.” The last was said casually, with an undercurrent of threat.

The meaning was obviously not lost on Snape. “My mind is always open to you, my Lord.”

“Yes, it is,” said Voldemort, as if conceding a point. “Her death was certainly made to appear as though done by a Death Eater. What is your speculation?”

“My best guess, my Lord, is an Auror, acting without authorization. Likely one of those who is close to Potter. I recall that Potter disliked Skeeter, and his friend Granger even more so. I know that is insufficient motive; there may be more that I do not know. Also pointing to an Auror is that the perpetrator Apparated and reached a Portkey without being caught, indicating some Apparation skill, and the fact that Aurors would have enough access to Potter to use some of him to make Polyjuice Potion.”

Voldemort looked thoughtful. “If it was done on Potter’s behalf, do you think he authorized or sanctioned it?”

“No, my Lord. He is far too squeamish about such things; recall that he stopped Black and Lupin from killing Wormtail.”

“Yes, very true. I never did properly thank him for that. Well, one day. Speaking of which, I am considering the possibility of taking more direct action against Potter. There may come a time when I ask you to do it yourself, to find a

way to take him by surprise and eliminate him, then leave Hogwarts. What do you think?"

Surprise showed on Snape's face. "I would be pleased, my—"

"Yes, I know, Snape, we all would be," said Voldemort in exasperation. "Perhaps I should have been more specific. I would like your opinion of the idea, strategically."

Snape thought for a moment. "It comes down to the assessment of him as a future threat, my Lord. If he is truly dangerous, then it might be worth it. If he is a mere annoyance, then it is not. My opinion, on balance, leans slightly in the direction of the idea that it should not be done. I could easily become the Hogwarts headmaster, and so could be highly useful. Surely there is someone else who could kill him."

"One would think so, but apparently not," said Voldemort, annoyed. "The mere fact of his continued survival does speak to his being a future threat. However, your point about being headmaster is well taken; I probably would have already decided to have you do it if not for that. Very well, Snape. You may withdraw."

"Thank you, my Lord," said Snape, and turned and left the room. Harry could feel Snape's mind relaxing, no longer intently focused on concentrating. His own concentration lessening, Harry withdrew from Snape's mind, refocusing on his current physical surroundings.

"Why did you show me that?" asked Harry. "It was interesting, but I don't see what it has to do with understanding your emotional state."

"As you saw in the first memory, my life is usually not all that interesting," explained Snape with dry understatement. "An encounter with the Dark Lord is the highlight of my day, of my week. Not because it is enjoyable, obviously, but because it is a challenge, and it is what I endure the rest of the time to be able to do. It requires my full effort and concentration, and reminds me of my usefulness and

importance. Perhaps you could see it as analogous to a Quidditch match, or the Triwizard tasks.”

“And so, for you, that’s as close as anything can come to being enjoyable,” Harry surmised.

“Yes, exactly. Except for those things I would find truly enjoyable—violence, Schadenfreude, and so forth—that I must do my best to eschew, as you know. The emotional atmosphere you saw in the first memory was largely absent in the second, as all aspects of my consciousness were focused on the task.”

Harry now understood Snape’s purpose in showing him the memory, but he wondered about something else. “You said that your mind was open to him, and he seemed to agree. How do you keep all this from him, but still have him think that he can look at anything in your mind?”

“Occlumency is a skill at which I truly excel,” said Snape, as Harry wondered if Snape could feel an emotion such as pride. “I am able to separate different types of memories into... sections of my mind, if you will. When I am in the Dark Lord’s presence, I place those memories I do not wish him to see in one particular area, and wall it off, in a sense, with Occlumency; it becomes like a false wall which looks like the true one. He can see any memory I choose to allow him to see, and he believes there are no others.”

Harry was impressed. “And he has no idea that you can do... well, I guess not, since you’d be dead otherwise. Did you show me that particular memory because of the parts that had to do with me?”

Snape nodded. “Yes, and to show you that I took a certain risk vis-à-vis the Dark Lord in killing Skeeter; he would have been most displeased had he discovered that I had done it, his mention of it being ‘understandable’ notwithstanding.”

“He was sort of trying to lure you into admitting it, if you had done it,” guessed Harry.

“To an extent, but he also did it to call up any potential memory I might have of having done it; he was searching me with Legilimens as he said it,” said

Snape. “But as to that which had to do with you, here we see the first benefits of my having been named deputy headmaster. If he gave me the instruction to kill you and leave Hogwarts, I could only put him off for so long. It would be necessary to stage an attempt on your life, fail, be arrested, and then ‘escape.’ I could still function as a spy for the Order, though with more difficulty. As I am so close to becoming headmaster, however, he is reluctant to use me in such a manner. Even so, he is seriously considering it, and he knows there is a time limit; after you graduate, I will not have access to you as I do now unless you stay on as Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, which he cannot afford to assume you will. As you saw, I am trying to discourage him without being too obvious. I have discussed this with the headmistress; if it appears that he will do this, she will feign a serious illness in the hope that this will dissuade him.”

“Because it would make it more likely that you’d be headmaster,” Harry said, thinking aloud.

“There are two more memories I wish to show you,” said Snape, as Harry had almost forgotten Snape’s original reason for showing him what he had just seen. Harry nodded, and cast Legilimens again.

He saw Snape sitting in the chair opposite Harry, as he currently was; Harry realized that he was seeing the memory which Snape had covered with the Memory Charm, from Snape’s point of view. He saw Snape viewing Harry’s recollection of the meeting with Skeeter. When Skeeter mentioned the possibility of revealing Harry’s relationship with Snape, Harry felt Snape experience a start, then a thrill of anticipation. Snape had realized instantly that he would have to kill Skeeter; he did not even debate it in his mind, so obvious a conclusion was it. Snape felt a rush of fear; Harry didn’t understand why at first. Exploring the feeling, he suddenly understood: Snape had already killed Fudge, experiencing both the thrill of the kill, then the aftereffects as he tried to recover from the impulse to continue along that path. Snape knew it would be very difficult to recover from that again, coming so soon after the other one, but he also knew he had no choice.

Snape viewed the memory again, formulating a plan as he did so. Harry felt Snape's disdain and frustration with him at his not having reported the information to McGonagall immediately, and the realization that it had an unintended benefit: Snape would not have to get McGonagall's prior approval to do what he knew needed to be done. Harry then felt Snape's annoyance in advance at Harry's predictable reaction upon finding out: he would be angry, self-righteous about having been manipulated to facilitate a murder, feel betrayed and moralistic without a proper understanding of the larger issues. Harry would be ruled by his immediate emotions, Snape knew. But he felt Snape also realize that Harry could not help it, being only seventeen, and Snape understood that he himself would not have done much better at controlling his emotions at that age. Snape did not have sympathy for Harry, but a rational understanding that Harry was often pushed to his limits emotionally, as he was simply by doing what he did to help Snape, and that Harry was doing the best he could. This did not mitigate Snape's annoyance, but it added a perspective to it.

Harry withdrew from Snape's mind again, and thought for a minute, Snape remaining silent. "You let me see that so I'd know that when you decided to do that, you weren't saying to yourself, 'Oh, good, I get to kill someone,'" Harry speculated.

"Crudely put, but accurate," Snape agreed. "I knew it would be a trial. Are you ready to view the last memory?" Harry nodded. "This occurs shortly after I awoke last Saturday morning, the day after I killed Skeeter."

Casting the spell, Harry saw and felt Snape lying in bed, in his quarters. Emotions overwhelmed him; Harry felt Snape feel a powerful need, a longing. He wanted to kill, he wanted to cause someone to suffer; not to do so was almost physically painful. He saw an image in Snape's mind; for a second, Snape was fantasizing about torturing a house-elf. He could see the elf screaming in Snape's mind's eye. With a conscious, painful effort, Snape shut off the thought. I must focus, Snape thought. Harry saw images of Dumbledore, echoes of past sessions in Dumbledore's mind. Harry felt Snape need to call him, but decide not to for fear

that Harry would find a morning session so unusual that he would wonder why, and perhaps piece together that Snape had killed Skeeter. Harry realized that Snape knew that if Harry figured it out, his emotional reaction would be such that he would be unable to help Snape, and Snape desperately needed his help. Snape knew he had to wait until the afternoon, at a more normal time. It was important that Harry not find out until Snape had recovered from this. From this thought Snape momentarily slipped into another fantasy of cruelty, then came out of it after a few seconds. It was almost a continual, constant effort not to have such thoughts. Snape looked at a clock on the wall. Six hours, he thought, six hours until I can safely call Potter. I must hold on...

Filling up with emotion, Harry put away his wand. This is what he would go through all the time, thought Harry, if I wasn't helping him. He wouldn't be able to do it, he couldn't withstand that kind of pressure indefinitely. He'd eventually let go, sink into the fantasies, and his personality would be so different that he couldn't be a professor, he couldn't deal with people correctly. He knew this would happen when he killed Skeeter; he would rather not have, but he did it because it had to be done. What must it be like, thought Harry in despair, to live like that all the time.

Harry looked up to see Snape looking at him, apparently understanding what was going on in his head. "The first time the headmaster saw me in that state, he wept openly." Harry found that he could easily believe it. "It is usually not nearly that acute, of course; that is almost as bad as it has ever been. I had not killed for a very long time, and to have to do so twice in one week was... very stressful."

There's an understatement, thought Harry. He sat silently for a minute, trying to process all he had seen and felt. "You showed me all that because you wanted me to know how it looks from your perspective," said Harry.

"Yes, that is right," agreed Snape. "You were inclined to judge me, and if you were going to, it was better that you had more information with which to do so. The headmaster once related to me a Muggle saying: 'Do not judge a man until you have walked a mile in his shoes.' It seems appropriate to this situation."

Harry found it hard to argue with that. He was still convinced that killing was wrong, and still wouldn't have condoned Skeeter's murder, but he found that his conviction was starting to waver. He knew that Snape was right about Ginny being willing to put morality aside to save his life, as she had said as much, and he wondered if he would for her. He suspected he would.

"Well... I guess I have a lot to think about," said Harry, not quite sure that he knew what to say, but feeling that he should leave. "I feel like I need some time to deal with all this. If you don't mind, I mean, if you'll be all right, I wondered—"

"I expected that you would require some time to process what has happened," said Snape. "I have recovered now, and my need is no more than usual. Take what time you feel necessary, though more than a week would not be advisable. Signal me when you feel ready to resume."

Harry nodded, stood, and left Snape's office, heading for his quarters. His mind was such a blur of thoughts that he barely noticed where he was going, and looked up to see that he was in front of his quarters. He entered, and Ginny and Hermione got up and turned to face him. He walked to Ginny and hugged her, holding her tightly. He continued holding her for far longer than he usually would. Over her shoulder, he saw Hermione looking at him with sympathy. He finally released Ginny, and they walked over to the sofa and sat down together, his arm still around her, as Hermione resumed her seat in the chair.

He told them what had happened, taking about ten minutes. Finishing, he said, "It's just amazing, the way he lives his life. I really felt like crying. It's so... barren, I guess. I guess that's why I hugged you like that when I got here," he added, looking at Ginny. "It just made me feel so lucky to have you, and you," looking at Hermione, "and the rest. I'm very lucky, I just usually don't think about that so much."

Ginny pulled him into another hug, which he returned gratefully. "I love you," she said. "We all do. I suppose you are lucky, we all are, to have each other. But keep in mind, everyone's lucky compared to him. He lives in worse

circumstances than... is possible to imagine, I'd think. But I see your point. Just a little while of seeing how he lives made you need a hug, but he has to deal with it all the time."

"Did it affect how you feel about what he did?" asked Hermione.

"That's the big question, isn't it," said Harry. "In some ways, yes, and in some ways, I'm not sure. I still wouldn't support Skeeter's murder, but seeing the situation from his perspective made it seem less like a murder and more like... something unpleasant that needed to be done. But it definitely makes me feel differently about how I feel about him doing it, and its connection with my relationship with him. When I first realized he did it, I think I felt like, he's a cold-blooded killer, and I'm helping him, how can I do that? Now it doesn't seem like that. In some ways that's not right, because I wouldn't see it that way if he'd killed someone close to me. But... I don't know, the whole thing's so confusing sometimes. I'm not sure what to think."

"Maybe the best thing is not to think too much about it right now," suggested Hermione. "You should probably let it rest for a while, your unconscious will work on it. It'll seem clearer at some point."

"Is that the way it worked for you, with your thing?" asked Harry, curious.

"I don't know, since I wasn't able to stop thinking about it," responded Hermione with a self-deprecating smile. "Do as I say, not as I did. Neville did manage to distract me sometimes, though."

"Good point, I was just thinking of distracting Harry," said Ginny with a grin at Harry, one whose meaning he had come to understand clearly.

"Oh, speaking of that," said Hermione, suddenly uncomfortable, "I thought you should know... you know I finally got into Harry's mind, that's how I found the Memory Charm. Before that happened, I, um..."

"You saw something," Ginny supplied, not sounding bothered. "What?"

"Jumping in the deep end," said Harry. "The robes."

"Ah," said Ginny. "What did you think?"

“It was very nice,” said Hermione sincerely.

“Really?” asked Ginny, sounding very pleased. “To be honest, I’ve never thought my body was all that great, but I’m really glad that you like it.”

“No, um, what I meant was...” started a flustered Hermione, who stopped speaking upon seeing Ginny’s wide, mischievous smile. Harry burst out laughing as Hermione smiled, recognizing that she’d been had. Shaking her head humorously, she stood and said, “Well, I think I’d better go, so you can use that nice body of yours to distract Harry.”

“Definitely one of its best uses,” agreed Ginny.

Still smiling, Hermione said, “See you later,” and left their quarters.

Harry leaned over to kiss Ginny, then chuckled. “That was so great... thanks, I really needed a good laugh.”

“I love to make you happy,” she said. She stood and took his hand, pulling him up. “Come on, I’ll make you even happier.”

“When you first mentioned that, my first thought was, I’m not sure if I’m in the right frame of mind for that sort of thing,” he replied, but let himself be pulled up.

She started leading him to the bedroom. “Of course, that’s part of the whole point of distraction,” she explained, as if it were obvious. “It’s to get you out of this frame of mind and into a different, better one.”

“Ah, I see,” he replied, again feeling very lucky to have her.

Back at the Burrow, the six gathered in the living room. Harry told them that Snape had killed Skeeter, but explained that he couldn’t tell them how he had found out. He decided it was best not to mention the Memory Charm as well. Ron, Neville, and Pansy were surprised. “I thought he was ruled out as a suspect because he couldn’t have known what she was threatening,” said Ron. “How did he find out?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you that, either,” said Harry.

Ron tried to rein in annoyance. “How about if you just mime it for us?”

Harry chuckled at the idea, but Pansy responded, “Ron, he tells us what he can. You know he would tell us all of it if he could.”

“I know, I didn’t mean anything like that,” said Ron defensively. “It’s just...”

“Hard to know some things, but not everything,” finished Harry. “I understand, I know how you feel. Not much I can do, unfortunately. At least now we know who did it and why, we don’t have to wonder anymore.”

“Seems kind of strange, though,” mused Pansy. “My Head of House is someone who kills people...”

“Only if he has to, though, and he felt he had to,” clarified Harry. “And remember, McGonagall said that she would have done it if she was convinced that Skeeter would talk about what she’d seen. He just wasn’t willing to take as many chances as her.”

Ron looked thoughtful. “D’you suppose Dumbledore ever killed?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “I should ask him. I doubt it, though. You saw the chances he was willing to take to respect Malfoy’s rights. It’s hard to imagine circumstances where he’d kill.”

“Who knows, maybe he did kill, and that’s why he became like he was, not willing to take even a tiny step towards doing the wrong thing,” suggested Pansy.

“Is that the kind of thing you can just ask him, though?” wondered Ron. “Say, Albus, did you ever kill anyone?”

“It would have been harder to do when he was still alive, or as he would say, when he was still physical,” said Harry. “But even then, he would have answered, because it’s an important question. Now, especially, he has no embarrassment or hesitation in talking about anything. Of course, I don’t have to ask him, because we’re talking about him, so he’s watching, and he’ll answer the question without my asking again.”

“So, is it not only people where Albus is, but also people who’ve moved on,” asked Ron, “who can—”

Ron was cut off by a face suddenly appearing in the fireplace; it was Dentus. "Archibald!" exclaimed Harry in surprise.

"Hello, Harry, everyone," said Dentus. "Sorry to interrupt. Harry, there are a few things that I'd like to discuss with you, if you have a few minutes. Could you come over here for a bit?"

"Sure," agreed Harry. "I'm not busy."

"You're welcome too, Hermione, if you're free," suggested Dentus. She nodded. "Okay, I'll be expecting you." His head vanished from the fireplace.

"Wonder if it's about Minister of Magic-related news," said Harry to Hermione.

"Wait, is this such a good idea?" asked Ron, concerned.

"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"I'm sorry, Neville," said Ron, "but let's remember what happened the last time one of us got an unexpected request to go to someone else's fireplace."

Looking somber at the reminder, Neville nonetheless said, "It's okay, Ron, I understand. You have a good point. We have to be careful."

"They just did that a few weeks ago," Harry said dismissively. "I don't think they're going to do the same thing again so soon. I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Yeah, I think the last time you said something like that was when Pansy signaled you to warn you about Goyle," retorted Ron.

Harry's eyebrows went up, as did a few others'. "So, just because of that, all of a sudden my judgment is suspect?"

Raising his voice, Ron responded, "When it comes to your safety, yes, your judgment is highly suspect, as far as I'm concerned."

Harry stared at Ron, who glared back, defiant. It suddenly occurred to Harry what motivated Ron's attitude; he remembered their conversation on Ron's birthday after they had discovered that Snape had searched the Slytherins' belongings. His expression softening, he nodded. He looked at the still-angry Ron with affection. "Thank you, Ron. I love you, too."

The girls smiled, and Ron looked at Harry as if trying to be sure that Harry wasn't being sarcastic. "Now you're just trying to butter me up, make up with me," said Ron in the same vein, calming down.

"I get your point, my track record with this isn't so great," Harry conceded. "But it's not going to happen. It's not common knowledge that Archibald talks to me, I think only one of his contacts knows. It's not the kind of thing that could get back to Death Eaters. Really, it'll be all right."

Ron was obviously not satisfied. "Look, tell you what. You go ahead and go, but we'll have the same system the Aurors do when they go out on calls. The second you arrive, look at your hand; if you don't, we'll be there in as long as it takes to grab Fawkes' tail. And even if it looks okay, be on guard. Don't let him get behind you, and check him out with Legilimens."

Harry looked unhappy. "I don't know for sure that I'm good enough yet to check like that without the person knowing I'm doing it."

"He knows what happened to Neville and I," pointed out Hermione. "I think he'd understand why you were being extra careful."

"Okay," Harry sighed. "Ready, Hermione?" She nodded, and he approached the fireplace. He went through, and before he could regain his balance coming out of Dentus's fireplace, he was hit with a Stunning Spell.

The first thing Harry saw upon regaining consciousness was a Killing Curse shield flicking off around him. Reflexively reaching for his wand, Harry took in what was happening. His five friends were in the center of the room, dueling with Death Eaters. Harry looked up to see Voldemort send Neville flying across the room as Harry's other friends started to crumple and fall to the ground, obviously victims of a Voldemort area-effect spell. Singing, Fawkes flew around from Death Eater to Death Eater, harassing them and obstructing their vision.

Not sure why he was doing it, Harry pointed his wand at Voldemort and sent out an energy beam, the same one he had used to disrupt Voldemort's wall of

energy in their encounter a month ago. Voldemort looked up in surprise and tried to block the beam, but it continued its progress, and hit its target. Voldemort crumpled to the ground, unconscious. Harry Summoned Voldemort's wand and cast the spell that would wrap him in ropes. As the ropes started to whirl around the prone Voldemort, to Harry's shock, Voldemort simply vanished.

"Dammit!" Harry yelled in frustration, then turned his attention to the rest of the room. He ran to the center, where his friends were starting to recover from the effects of Voldemort's spell, doing their best to defend themselves from incoming spells as they did so. Focusing intently, Harry shot off Stunning Spells, taking down two Death Eaters in quick succession before being forced to ward off incoming spells as the remaining Death Eaters focused their attention on him. Popping noises filled the air as Aurors started Apparating in; Harry realized that they had probably been trying, but had been stopped by a Voldemort anti-Apparation field, which was now gone, since Voldemort was. Vastly relieved—his friends were still on the ground, and he knew he couldn't have held off six Death Eaters for more than a few more seconds—Harry put down an anti-Disapparation field, then turned his attention back to the fight. He got off two more Stunning Spells before there was no one left to fight, as the Aurors had quickly overwhelmed the Death Eaters with superior numbers; there were now twelve Aurors, and more continued to arrive.

"Fan out!" shouted Kingsley, and groups of two Aurors raced into adjacent rooms. Harry checked his friends, struggling to their feet, but all were all right. He asked them, "Where's Archibald? Is he all right?"

"We don't know," said Neville, rubbing his shoulder. "All we saw when we got here was Death Eaters."

"In here!" shouted an Auror from the kitchen. Harry ran in behind Kingsley to see a dazed-looking Dentus sitting at the kitchen table. Kingsley waved his wand, and Dentus blinked, appearing to come out of whatever haze he had been in. He looked around the room and saw something that Harry hadn't seen yet: his wife on

the floor, face up. Dentus got up and moved quickly to her, as did Kingsley, who checked for a pulse at her neck. He looked at Dentus sadly and shook his head. Sitting on the floor, Dentus took his wife's hand and bowed his head; Harry could not see his face.

Grief overwhelming him, Harry stepped forward. Kingsley stood and walked toward Harry. He took Harry's arm, steering him away from Dentus, to the other side of the large kitchen. Their backs to Dentus, Kingsley whispered to Harry. "I know what you want to say to him. That you're sorry, that it's your fault, that it wouldn't have happened if not for you." Kingsley could obviously tell from Harry's face that he was right. "He doesn't need to hear that right now, Harry. It's not going to do him any good. He's in shock, anyway, he wouldn't be able to process much of anything you said. Remember how you were after Sirius died, nobody could have talked to you, especially right away. He needs time. But even after he recovers, it's not going to help him for you to tell him it was your fault. Both of them had to have known the risks. This is because of Voldemort, not you." He steered Harry again, toward the living room.

They met a group of six Aurors and Harry's friends. "Dentus is all right," said Kingsley. "His wife is dead." Harry's friends looked at him with intense sorrow as he struggled not to lose his composure. He felt Ginny take his hand and Fawkes settle on his shoulder. Kingsley spoke to another Auror quietly, then turned to Harry. "I'd like you all to come with me to the Auror area at the Ministry, the room you went to after the department store attack. It has a Pensieve. Is everyone okay to do that?" Staring straight ahead, Harry nodded numbly. Kingsley Disapparated, and then his friends did, one by one, then finally he did as well.

Memories of the department store attack flooded into Harry as he looked around the room. Ginny stepped over to him and hugged him tightly, and he felt the tears start to come. He sobbed into her shoulder as she held him. "It's not your fault," she said quietly but firmly. "It's not, it's not." He didn't respond, continuing to cry and hold her. After a minute, he stopped, and was handed tissues by

Hermione. Pansy took his hand for a few seconds, giving him a look that reinforced what Ginny had said.

“Who should give the memory?” asked Kingsley.

The others exchanged glances. “It should be one of you four,” said Hermione. “You got there before I did, or about the same time.”

“I’ll do it, I’ve used it before,” said Pansy. She walked over and put her memories into the Pensieve. Harry forced himself to put aside his grief long enough to watch what had happened. He put a finger into the Pensieve, as did the others.

They were in the Burrow living room, and Harry saw himself enter the fireplace. Hermione threw in the Floo powder, said the name of her destination, and stepped in. As she did so, Ron whirled his wand and said, “Fawkes.” Fawkes appeared. Neville and Ron grabbed the tail feathers while Pansy held onto Ron, and Ginny, Neville. Ron glanced at Ginny, who shook her head. “Go!” shouted Ron, and Fawkes took off.

They were in Dentus’s living room. A Killing Curse was on the way to Harry’s unconscious form, on the floor near the fireplace. Ron instantly pointed his wand at Harry, and the green shield went up. Watching, Harry thought that the Curse was so close to him that the shield should have been too late, but obviously it wasn’t. A half-second later Hermione stepped out of the fireplace, and immediately ran to the center of the room to join the others, who were already engaging the Death Eaters; Harry could now see that there were six Death Eaters and Voldemort. Neville engaged Voldemort, and the others took on individual Death Eaters, none of whom Harry recognized. The Killing Curse shield lingered for a few seconds, and Harry saw himself awaken just as it disappeared. Then he saw himself point the wand at Voldemort and send out the energy beam, and wondered again why he had done it. He felt Fawkes trying to send him impressions, and tried to clear his mind so he could make sense of them. He saw an image of

Dumbledore, in the phoenix place as he usually saw Dumbledore in his sleep. Is Fawkes trying to tell me that Albus caused Voldemort's unconsciousness? he wondered. He waited for further impressions.

Kingsley played the memory again, but Harry barely paid attention; he was more interested in what Fawkes was trying to tell him. They all left the Pensieve.

"Well, I have several questions, but let's start with the big one," said Kingsley. "Harry, what did you do to Voldemort? What was that beam?"

"I don't know why I did it," said Harry, trying to concentrate. "I just did it. Can you give me a minute? Fawkes is trying to tell me something." Kingsley nodded, and the room was silent. As Harry finally understood what Fawkes was trying to communicate, Harry's mouth opened in astonishment. The others looked at him with anticipation.

"I think... I'll know for sure later, when Fawkes can tell me in a way that takes longer and is more accurate, but... I'm pretty sure he's trying to tell me that he's in communication with Albus!"

The others gaped in amazement. "Are you sure?" asked Kingsley.

"Pretty sure," said Harry. "I'll know for certain tonight, of course. Here's what I think happened, from what I got from Fawkes. Albus communicated to Fawkes that he wanted me, as soon as I regained consciousness, to do what I ended up doing. Fawkes sent me the impression that it would be a good thing to do, as strongly as he could. When I awoke, the feeling was in my mind so strongly that I just did it, I didn't even think about it. What I don't know is how Albus managed to communicate with Fawkes."

"And he communicated a way for you to knock out Voldemort?" asked Kingsley.

"No, that's the strange thing. If I'm understanding Fawkes correctly, and I'm pretty sure I am—if I was wrong, I'd be getting feelings telling me I was—what I did, that beam, had nothing to do with what happened to Voldemort. That was Albus, the same as last time. The reason he wanted me to do that is that he wants

Voldemort to think I was the one who did it to him last time, that I can do that to him any time I want to, if I get close enough.”

Kingsley shook his head in awe. “And that is what he’ll think, for sure,” he said, half to himself. “Amazing. I don’t suppose you know why Voldemort disappeared.”

Harry shook his head. “Not exactly, but Albus did predict it. He said that since he incapacitated Voldemort in June, Voldemort would always be certain to have a way to get out of the situation, even if he was made unconscious. It looks like he was right, and that was what we saw.”

“One thing I was wondering about,” asked Ginny, “was that after Voldemort disappeared, we were fighting those Death Eaters, and Harry came over and started blowing them away, just one Stunning Spell each, I think he ended up getting three like that. Why didn’t they have their Protection Shields up, if they were dueling?”

“Yes, I noticed that too,” said Kingsley. “I’m pretty sure they did have their shields up. Harry is just very, very strong, and they probably weren’t the strongest Death Eaters in the world. A first year can put up a Protection Shield, but if even an average wizard hits them with a Stunning Spell, the shield won’t help much.”

There was a silence for a few seconds, then Harry asked, “Had they done the Imperius Curse on Archibald?”

Kingsley nodded. “They obviously killed his wife because she wasn’t necessary, but they didn’t kill him right away, in case they needed him later. When we found him in the kitchen he was still under the Imperius Curse, but just unfocused, because Voldemort was no longer giving him instructions. I was able to bring him out of it.”

“I don’t understand how they knew,” said Harry. “Archibald said that he only told one other person that he talked to me.”

“Remember, Harry, you told me that he does this to politicians and other high-ranking people,” said Hermione, “where he goes over their memories and then

kills them, blackmails them, or does a Memory Charm. He must have done it either to whoever Archibald told, or Archibald himself. He just... got lucky, and found the connection to you. And he probably decided to do this quickly, since the Hogwarts term starts in a few weeks.”

“That makes sense,” agreed Kingsley. “Harry, what happened when you arrived at Dentus’s fireplace? We didn’t see that in this memory.”

“I’m not sure, I wasn’t really even out yet, but I think it was a Stunning Spell. I think they chose that rather than a Killing Curse because the Killing Curse shield kind of comes on automatically. They must have decided to get me unconscious, then do the Killing Curse. They were probably planning to do the same to Hermione, the other four just got there before they could.”

“What made you come, anyway?” asked Kingsley. Neville gave a recap of the conversation that had taken place after Dentus had called. Kingsley nodded and said, “Well done, Ron. The rest of you keep that up, and Harry’ll get through this all right. I guess I don’t need to tell you at this point that you should consider no fireplace secure. Well, ours, you can. But you should still go out in public, Harry. In fact, you should think about doing it tomorrow, or soon. I’d rather they knew that you weren’t going to hide every time something like this happens.

“Also, I was going to tell you tomorrow, you and Neville, we’re ready to start your training again. Same schedule as before. Think you’ll be ready for Monday?” Neville and Harry exchanged a glance and a nod. “Okay, I’ll see you then. I’m going to follow up on this situation, you all should just take the fireplace home.” Kingsley Disappeared, and Harry followed his friends to the nearest Ministry fireplace.

Harry was the last through the Burrow fireplace, and as he walked out, he saw Molly already hugging those who had come first. He saw Arthur and, to his surprise McGonagall, sitting in the living room. Molly hugged him and resumed her seat on the sofa; Harry and his friends remained standing, as there weren’t enough chairs for everyone to sit.

“One of the Aurors on the scene came directly to me and told me what had happened while Kingsley was debriefing you,” explained McGonagall. “Only the broad details, of course, since the action was finished by the time they got there. If one of you would be so good as to relate the details...”

Harry’s expression clearly conveyed that he did not want to be the one to do so. Hermione volunteered, and took only a few minutes to tell the story. Ginny put an arm around Harry, and held him tightly.

As Hermione finished, McGonagall was shaking her head in amazement. “Albus is still full of surprises, I see. Harry, it would be helpful if you would meet Kingsley and I, perhaps at the Auror training area tomorrow, to let us know what Albus tells you about this.” Harry nodded. “And, before I leave... Harry, would you sit for a moment?” She indicated an empty spot on the sofa near her chair. Harry sat and faced her, his face expressionless.

“Unless I am very wrong, Harry, you are holding yourself responsible for this, because Voldemort would have had little interest in Dentus but for his connection to you. I assume this connection goes back to March, when the ARA was being debated. At that point, it had been six months since you had defied Voldemort in the loudest and most public way possible, and he had ordered three attempts on your life. I think it is very safe to say that both Dentus and his wife were very well aware of any possible risks of being associated with you.

“Voldemort does not target people because of their association with you per se, Harry. He targets them because in working with you, they are working against him. Your only causal connection to this is that you are doing what you should be doing, and you have annoyed him considerably by surviving. I believe Mr. Finch-Fletchley said it very well in the interview after Hogsmeade: that in helping you, one is working against Voldemort, and that is what we all should be doing. There are risks to doing that, as you know very well, as do those who choose to take them. They do so anyway, because they wish to do the right thing. Grieve for them, by all means, but place the blame squarely where it belongs. You know where that is,

and it is not with you.” She stood, said goodbye to Arthur and Molly, and exited through the fireplace.

Ginny sat on the sofa next to Harry and hugged him, and he hugged her back. He felt as though he should feel self-conscious because there were so many people in the room, but he didn’t, because he felt so close to all of them. Still holding Ginny, he said to everyone, “Part of me understands she’s right... it’s just really hard right now. I mean, first Neville’s grandmother, now this...”

Neville took a few steps to where Harry could see him while holding Ginny. “Harry, I think you know this, but I’m going to remind you anyway. My grandmother was very proud that I helped save you in Hogsmeade, and that I stood by you while you were Voldemort’s number one target. She would have rather died the way she did than lived while keeping her head down and telling me to do the same. A lot of people are going to feel that way, and some are going to die. Some people are going to keep their heads down, and they’re probably going to live. It’s a choice everyone makes. But let me tell you this: if I die helping you, and you so much as blame yourself once, I’ll come to that place where you talk to Dumbledore and kick your ass.”

Despite how bad Harry felt, he couldn’t help but laugh, and everyone else did as well. Even though Neville had shed most of his old shyness, Harry felt there was still something funny about him saying that kind of thing. Feeling very grateful, Harry got up, walked over to Neville, and hugged him. Shoving aside embarrassment, he said, “I love you, Neville.”

“I love you too, Harry,” said Neville as he patted Harry’s back and released him. With the barest hint of a smile, he added, “And thank you for saying that. You had said it to everyone else except me, I was starting to feel bad.”

Harry laughed again, along with the others. “Didn’t mean to exclude you, Neville, believe me.” He sat again, now smiling. “That’s the second time now that you’ve really made me laugh after almost getting killed. Thank you.”

“We all do what we can,” said Neville, sitting in a chair next to Hermione and taking her hand.

Harry’s smile faded, as it came back to him that unlike that occasion, someone had died this time. “I guess this is a little like Hogsmeade, except that in this case, the people knew the risks they were taking. But Albus said it didn’t get any easier, and I suppose he’s right.”

“He also said you’d get through it with our help,” said Ginny. “He was right about that, too.”

* * * * *

Harry found himself standing in the phoenix place, which was as beautiful as ever. “Another difficult day,” said Dumbledore. “You seem to have more than your share of them. Fortunately, you also have more than your share of friends, and love.”

“I need it, that’s for sure,” Harry agreed. “Especially after what I saw today, and what I went through, sometimes I wonder how Professor Snape gets along without that, without anything like that.”

“It is very difficult for him, as you now understand better than ever,” agreed Dumbledore. “There are several things we should discuss; do you have a preference as to which one is first?”

“Not really, so I guess I’ll say, the one about Professor Snape first.” Before Harry could ask, Snape’s ‘other half’ appeared. Harry greeted him, then asked, “The first thing I’m wondering about is, how do you feel about what he did?”

“I try, as do all of us who inhabit this place for whatever length of time, not to make judgments about those in physical form,” explained Snape. “It would be so easy for us; this is a highly pleasant environment, free of stress of any kind. For us to point and say ‘you should do this’ or ‘you shouldn’t do that’ would be demeaning to those whom we would judge.”

“You wouldn’t even judge murder?” asked Harry, surprised.

“If one observes the principle, no,” answered Snape. “One thing which is more clear from where Albus and I reside is that there is no such thing as right and wrong, there are no absolutes. You are experiencing that now, in a way; you are sure that murder is wrong, but it troubles you that there might be reasonable justifications for it in certain circumstances. What if one murder saves a thousand? This is one of the points of life, that we are forced to make such judgments. We must decide what is right and what is wrong. Some things may seem obvious, such as that torturing another for pleasure is wrong. I am not saying it is not wrong, just that there is no universal law that says it is. We decide such things. Some seem quite obvious; some, such as killing Rita, seem less so. I know you would like an opinion to help you decide, but we cannot give it to you. You must simply decide for yourself.”

“It’s a bit like when you wouldn’t give me your opinion on the ARA, isn’t it,” Harry asked Dumbledore.

“Except that in that situation, I had an opinion; I simply declined to tell you what it was,” said Dumbledore. “In this situation, we truly have no opinion. But otherwise, it is similar, yes. It is important for us to make our own judgments. And as was the case in that situation, you have all the information necessary to make your judgment. I sympathize; some such judgments are very difficult.”

Harry thought for a minute, then asked, “Did you ever kill, Albus?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, Harry, I did. On one occasion. No doubt you are familiar with my defeat of the Dark wizard Grindelwald, as it is mentioned on my Chocolate Frog card. It was he who I killed.”

“Did you regret doing it?”

“Yes, I did,” said Dumbledore calmly, as if he were discussing any ordinary subject. “I did not wish to kill, but I ended up deciding to do so, for what I felt was the greater good. Influencing my decision was the fact that six months before his final defeat, I at one point had him in my power. I could have killed him then, but I

attempted to capture him instead, and he escaped me. He went on to kill twenty-two more wizards, and perhaps over a hundred Muggles, before I finally defeated him. Needless to say, those deaths weighed heavily on my conscience.” Harry’s heart went out to Dumbledore. He could put himself in Dumbledore’s place all too easily.

“Killing him was one of the hardest things I ever did,” Dumbledore continued. “One needs a strong feeling of hate to use the Killing Curse effectively, and that did not come naturally to me. Also highly unpleasant were the aftereffects of having done so. Ironically, though I was hailed as a hero and honored greatly, the six months after I killed him were the most miserable of my life. The scene replayed in my mind many times over, and the sure knowledge that I had saved lives was of little solace. Despite the twenty-two deaths, after that experience I promised myself that I would never kill again, no matter what the reason or circumstances. Pansy was quite correct in her speculation yesterday; that experience greatly informed my future judgments regarding what was right or wrong.

“In addition to the mental stress of my having killed, I also experienced a severe degradation of my magical abilities. I suddenly could not do difficult spells that I had before, and normal spells less effectively. I was very discouraged by this, and at first attributed it to depression over what I had done; later, I took it as a sign from whatever greater power existed that I should not kill. Of course, after your experience, I realized that I had been using the energy of love, and that putting myself in the proper frame of mind to kill made me unable to use the energy of love, resulting in my abilities becoming far more... ordinary, one could say.

“I developed a set of principles as to how people should be treated, and decided to follow them unwaveringly, no matter the consequences. I knew that this would be quite painful at times, as the twenty-two deaths had been, but I felt it was the right thing to do. Now, I hasten to emphasize that this was simply a judgment I reached, and not necessarily better than anyone else’s. One could easily argue that it was less than morally sound, because it led to people suffering when it could have been avoided. For example, Pansy was violently assaulted and tortured when it

could have been prevented by my doing what seemed to most to be common sense. You were very nearly killed.”

Dumbledore regarded Harry seriously, as if hoping to make sure that Harry took his next words to heart. “You may well reach a different judgment than I did, Harry. You should not think for a moment that any judgment you reach is flawed if you do so. It may be that if you follow my principles, you may lose one or more of your close friends, while if you do not, they will live. Whatever you choose will be something you must live with, and the consequences could be bad no matter what you choose. Lives will be affected by what you do. As you know, it is a terrible burden. I sympathize with you greatly, and I wish I could give you easy answers. Unfortunately, there are none.”

Harry was silent for a minute, thinking. “I understand. I should have known it wouldn’t be that easy.” He paused again, then said, “I’ll have to think about that some more.” Turning to Snape, he asked, “Was it hard for him to show me what he did?”

“I do not know if ‘hard’ would be the right word exactly,” said Snape, “but it represented a further deepening of his relationship with you. He could not have done it, say, in the first week after you began. It has now been seven weeks, which while not a long time, is long enough for him to get a very good sense of who you are. He still finds you immature, which was his main concern when this began, but he is very impressed with the emotional resiliency you have shown. Of course he is aware that before your sessions you spend a few minutes developing a state of mind consistent with the use of the energy of love, and he has come to see the similarity of that to the state of mind that Albus almost always had; by that age, it came to Albus naturally, effortlessly. With you it requires an effort, but you do it, and it is a state of mind that he needs you to have, though he did not know this at first. He now realizes that no one but you could have replaced Albus, no matter how willing, as the emotional environment would not have been the same. Never having done it with anyone but Albus, it did not occur to him that it would be such a different

experience with a different person. As to what happened yesterday, he knew that it was important that you see things from his perspective, and he has become comfortable enough with you in this role to do so.”

Harry nodded. “Well, I guess that’s as much as I could have hoped for, by this time.”

“It is quite impressive, really, on his part as well as yours,” said Snape. “He had an adjustment to make, and he made it.”

“I guess it’s easy not to think about how this is for him... or at least it was, until yesterday. I should ask about other stuff, I know we don’t have all the time in the world. Albus, did you really communicate with Fawkes?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Yes, I did. It was very nice, like talking to an old friend again after an absence. It simply had not occurred to me that I might be able to do so. It takes a very specific, focused effort, but it can be done. He was very surprised to hear from me, but of course he knew who it was immediately. He was able to quickly convey to you what I hoped you would do.”

“That’s great,” said Harry, happy for Dumbledore. “I’m glad that you’ll be able to talk to... well, I guess it’s more like, commune with him again.”

“Yes, we are both very pleased,” agreed Dumbledore. “I will be able to send you messages of a sort, of the same type that Fawkes can convey to you. Detailed communication will have to wait until you are asleep, though it will rarely be necessary to communicate through him in any case. It is good to have this option, of course.”

“Why was it so important for me to do that? He already thought I was the one who knocked him unconscious, in June.”

“He suspected it, but now he knows, or thinks he does. It was my hope that this will cause him to cease personal participation in any such attacks on you in the future, and perhaps cease participating in any attacks which may draw the attention of the Aurors, since he knows that you are on call for emergencies. He will now be

quite frightened of you, the first time in many years he has been frightened of anything. This could very well save lives.

“To respond to the question you are forming, yes, I would have incapacitated him anyway, even if Fawkes had been unable to receive my message. It was very necessary, as you saw that your friends were losing the battle. They would have been rendered unconscious, then shortly killed, as would you have. I had to do it, so I hoped that we could kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. As for the experience itself, it was no less unpleasant than last time, just more familiar.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that,” said Harry. “I appreciate it, we all do. You saved our lives.”

Dumbledore nodded his acknowledgment. “I am pleased to be able to do so, even from where I am. With any luck, events such as yesterday’s will slow down or stop entirely.”

Harry looked down and shook his head. “A little too late for Archibald,” he said.

“Very true,” said Dumbledore solemnly. “Which brings me to the next topic.” Harry had noticed that Snape had disappeared about a minute ago. Now, another form appeared, and he quickly recognized it as Sarah Dentus.

She approached him, and he felt emotion rising again. “I’m so sorry—”

She took his hand. “People have been telling you since this happened that it was not your fault. Perhaps if I tell you as well, you will take it more seriously. Harry, we knew very well what risks we were taking, even before you became involved. Archibald knew that the ARA could save lives, but nobody at the Ministry was actively and publicly advocating it, because they were afraid of attracting Voldemort’s attention. We were concerned as well, but in the end we decided to take the risk. Later, we knew there was a further risk in his helping you, even if very few people knew, but that decision was a little easier. As Archibald put it at the time, ‘He’s setting himself up as Voldemort’s main target, practically daring Voldemort to try to kill him. How can I decide not to help him when he takes risks like that?’ I

agreed. We went into this with our eyes wide open. We were simply unlucky. I am very glad that Archibald survived, and that you and your friends did as well. Archibald will miss me greatly, of course, but he will be comforted to know that I am here. We had heard of people communicating from places like this, and wondered whether we would be able to. Now, I will say what I wish to say to him.” As she spoke, Harry again felt as though he were intruding on a personal conversation, but was pleased that Dentus’s grief would probably be lessened, even if only a little.

The next day, Harry sat down with the others for lunch, just having finished visiting with Dentus for an hour. “How did it go?” asked Molly.

“He was very happy to see Sarah again, of course,” said Harry, “but it’s so soon that he’s still in a bad way about it. I would have given him a few days before trying to talk to him, but I wanted him to see it right away.”

“Understandable,” said Arthur. “I assume he also told you that it wasn’t your fault.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, he was really firm about that. I’m beginning to accept it, but... it’s like, the good thing about helping me is that when your loved ones die, you get a message from them after they’re gone. The bad thing is, your loved ones die.”

“A lot of people died sixteen years ago,” said Arthur. “A lot were helping Dumbledore, but that doesn’t make it his fault. I know you’ve heard this before, but we’re going to keep telling you.”

Harry nodded, wondering if they felt that he was wallowing in self-pity by making comments like the one he had just made; he then wondered if he actually was. All he knew was that it was how he felt. Part of him understood that they were right, and part felt that they couldn’t understand how he felt. “I know, it’s just hard seeing that happen to people you care about.”

“It makes sense,” said Ginny sympathetically. “You just spent an hour with someone who’s still really grieving, it’s bound to affect you.”

“Well, I was thinking we would go do something this afternoon,” suggested Molly. “Kingsley said Harry should get out more anyway, and this would be a good thing to distract him.”

Harry and Ginny exchanged a smile. He glanced over at Hermione, who was smiling as well, and looking down, apparently hoping not to be seen. Seeing their expressions, Molly looked at them suspiciously, but offered no comment. “What did you have in mind?” asked Arthur.

“Just a trip to Diagon Alley,” said Molly. “Walk around, look in the shops, have a snack at Florean Fortescue’s, that sort of thing. We could get Ginny’s N.E.W.T. books while we’re there.”

“You guys don’t need books?” asked Ginny, surprised.

“The N.E.W.T. books cover years six and seven,” explained Hermione.

Ginny raised her eyebrows. “Funny how I have lots of older brothers and I didn’t know that.” She paused slightly before the word ‘lots,’ and Harry wondered if she was going to say ‘six’ and changed her mind.

“Well, most of us don’t pay attention to that kind of thing,” remarked Ron. “I didn’t know either, until I got the books. Now, Hermione, on the other hand, probably knew that when she was a first year.”

“Third year, actually,” said Hermione casually, apparently deciding not to reward Ron with a reaction.

“Oh, right, third year,” said Ron, just as casually. “That was when you were taking eighteen classes, right?”

She sighed and gave him an annoyed look. “Yes, Ron. I was taking eighteen classes. Hogwarts only offers twelve, but I was taking eighteen.”

Ron shrugged. “Well, you were using a Time-Turner to put more hours into the day. Maybe you were using a Dimension-Door to also go to a different version of Hogwarts where they teach different classes.”

Harry failed in his effort not to laugh, as did Neville, Pansy, and Ginny. Despite herself, Hermione smiled a little. “Yes, I did, and the Ron in that dimension was much nicer than you.”

“Ah,” said Ron, nodding. “Fancied him, did you?”

“I’m not sure I like the direction this conversation is taking,” said Hermione with mock nervousness, as the others laughed again. “Besides, the Dimensional Door doesn’t work that way.”

“There is such a thing?” asked Ron, surprised. “I was only making it up. Or are you pulling my leg?”

“There is something called a Dimensional Door, yes, or at least there’s reputed to be,” said Hermione. “I’ve only heard it mentioned once, in a book I once read about wizarding myths and legends, so it could just be a... well, a myth or a legend. It’s supposed to be like, there are two portals, or doors. One is constant, in our dimension, and one moves around to random dimensions, coming back to ours once every X number of months or years. But you couldn’t use it like you said, since you can’t control where it goes, or how often it goes there.”

“Who would have made something like that?” wondered Neville. “Or could have, for that matter?”

“If it’s true, it would probably be one of those big mysteries, like who built the Veil of Mystery,” suggested Hermione. “But it’s probably not true anyway. The book was entertaining, but most of the stuff in it was really dubious. It’s stuff that I don’t think even Luna’s father would publish.”

“Really?” asked Ginny. “More dubious than the idea that Cornelius Fudge crushed goblins and had them baked in pies?”

“Okay, I take that back,” replied Hermione, conceding the point. “He would publish it.”

“Say, now that Fudge is gone, I wonder who gets to use his army of heliopaths,” joked Ron.

Not having been present for the meeting at the Hog's Head, Pansy didn't laugh, and neither did Harry, though the others did. "I know she can be strange, but I really do like Luna," said Harry. "I don't know if I want to be making fun of her."

Ron looked chagrined and defensive. "I think we're making fun of the idea of an army of heliopaths and Cornelius 'Goblin-Crusher' Fudge, rather than Luna exactly," he said. "I like her too, I think we all do."

"Did I tell you that she was one of the ones who came to see me, that day in the infirmary?" asked Pansy. The others shook their heads. "I had always made fun of her a lot—she was a pretty easy target—but she was really nice. I apologized for what I had done, and she just brushed it off, saying, 'Oh, don't feel bad, everyone does it,' which made me feel worse. She certainly doesn't hold a grudge."

"No, she definitely has a... serenity, I guess you could say," agreed Hermione.

After a short pause, Molly asked, "So, is everyone all right to go to Diagon Alley?" Harry wondered if the question was directed mostly at him; he nodded along with the others. "Good. I've already told Kingsley we might go, so I'll let him know before we do, and the Aurors will be ready."

As they finished their lunch, they heard a voice coming from the fireplace. Arthur got up to respond, then came back to the table. "Harry, it's for you. Something to do with Quidditch, apparently." Shrugging, Harry got up to answer. The mention of Quidditch having piqued Ron's interest, he too went to the living room, standing in a spot which couldn't be seen from the fireplace.

"Ah, Professor Potter, thank you," said the man, who appeared to be in his fifties, balding, with short brown hair. "I am Alan Woodridge, chairman of the English Quidditch Association. I wonder if I could have a word with you."

Surprised, Harry wondered what it was about. "Sure, go ahead."

"Would it be possible for you to pop over here? I'd prefer to say what I want to say in person, it wouldn't take long."

Harry wondered if he would have seen the potential danger in such a thing twenty-four hours ago. "I'm sorry, Mr. Woodridge, but I really can't be going to anyone's fireplace right now. The Aurors don't want me going to any fireplace that I, or they, don't personally know is secure." He shrugged in apology.

Woodridge looked slightly taken aback, but recovered. "Yes, I see. Ah, well, then... I suppose I can ask you what I want to from here. You probably know, Professor, that—"

"Please call me 'Harry.'"

"Yes, thank you, Harry. You probably know that as it's held every four years, the Quidditch World Cup is coming around again next summer. As the chairman of the EQA, assembling the team is my responsibility. Qualifying matches begin in a few months, and the process of team member selection will be starting very soon. Most players are chosen from the ranks of professional teams, but we always want to keep our eyes open for players who might help us. My purpose in contacting you is to tell you that we would be interested in considering you to be a member of this year's team."

Harry felt his heart leap, and gaped in surprise. "You want me to be on the English Quidditch World Cup team?" He involuntarily glanced at Ron, who wore an equally stunned look.

"Well, not exactly; we would like you to try out for the team," clarified Woodridge. "You might very well not make it; I don't want to raise your hopes." Harry was suddenly struck by a feeling that Woodridge wasn't being completely honest, and he reached out with Legilimens. "It's simply that our information is that you are an outstanding Seeker, considering your age. I have talked with your former captain, Oliver Wood, who believes that you would match up well with the Seekers on our professional teams. I would not want to pass up a chance to recruit the best players possible."

Harry could detect nothing in the last few sentences that was untruthful, and wondered if he had imagined it before. He decided to ask a question to

determine whether he had. “So you think there’s a good chance I might not make the team.”

Woodridge shrugged. “I don’t know if I’d say, a ‘good’ chance, but obviously it will be highly competitive. There are twelve highly skilled, professional Seekers in competition, all of whom needless to say would very much like to play on the team. But from what I’ve heard, you have as good a chance as any of them.”

As Woodridge spoke, Harry detected a memory contradicting what he was saying: Woodridge clearly felt that Harry was a certainty to make the team if he tried out. Harry didn’t know why, but he had a suspicion. “Mr. Woodridge—”

“Alan, please.”

Harry nodded. “Alan, I’m sorry to ask this, but... all my life, a lot of things have happened to me because I’m famous. Is that part of why you’re asking me?”

“No, it is not,” Woodridge assured him, and Harry knew instantly that it was a lie; he detected a memory of Woodridge’s excitement when Wood had suggested to him that Harry be given a tryout, and Woodridge’s understanding that it would be a great publicity coup for English Quidditch to have Harry Potter on the team. “As I said, Oliver Wood felt that you would have as good a chance of making the team as anyone else. I do not want to leave any stone unturned in order to put the best team on the field. And there will be reserves, of course. Even if you were not the starting Seeker, we will have at least one and possibly two reserve Seekers; you know very well how dangerous it can be to be a Seeker.”

Harry detected that Woodridge did not necessarily plan to make him the starting Seeker; having him on the team would be good enough, though he would get the nod if he was fairly close in ability to the best of the professional players. He wondered if his disappointment showed on his face, which he tried to keep expressionless. “Yes, I do know that. It just seems like I’m awfully young to play at that level.”

“You will be eighteen by the time of the finals, assuming we make it that far; you may recall that Viktor Krum was only seventeen when he played, brilliantly,

for Bulgaria in the final three years ago. Your age is obviously no impediment, as there is precedent for one so young to play at that level.”

Harry had to concede that that was true. “I guess so. Well, obviously, it would be fantastic to play on the English team. But I’d have to think about whether it’s something I could do or not. As you may know, I’m going to be both a teacher and a student this year, and I’d have very little free time to join team practices; I assume there’d be a lot of them. Also, I’m concerned about security. You probably know that being around me isn’t exactly safe, and I hate to think about the danger that my being around could bring to the team.”

Woodridge nodded sympathetically. “It’s good of you to be concerned about that. But we do have private security arrangements; we would have them anyway, as the team will be very high-profile, and for that reason a possible target even if you were not on it. As for the time situation, Wood did explain that to me, and it is a concern. But you do practice quite a bit at Hogwarts, he tells me, and it’s more important that you practice at all than where you do it, exactly. You know that for Chasers and Beaters it’s important to practice with the rest of the team, but Keepers and Seekers mostly operate alone. You would practice with us when you could, but what would be more important would be simply that you keep in practice.”

Harry doubted that such arrangements would be made for any other player, no matter how skilled. He also doubted that whatever ‘private’ security wizards Woodridge used would be anywhere near as competent as Aurors, and he still felt he would bring a great deal of danger to the team if he joined. “I understand. When would the tryouts be?”

“The first weekend of September,” replied Woodridge. He looked at Harry intently. “Is this not something you want to do, Harry? You seem hesitant, and most Quidditch players would be jumping at the chance.”

“I would love to do it,” said Harry truthfully. “If Voldemort weren’t around, and if I weren’t both a teacher and a student, then I would probably be jumping at it. But there’s just so much going on... I just have to think about it a bit.”

“I understand,” said Woodridge, and Harry detected that he didn’t really understand, but was saying it to be polite. “Well, you think it over, then, and let me know what you decide.” He said goodbye, and withdrew from the fireplace.

Harry looked across the room and saw that the others, including Molly and Arthur, were standing near the kitchen so they could hear the conversation, no doubt having been alerted by Ron. Ron walked up to Harry as Harry approached the others. “Are you crazy?” asked Ron incredulously. “Why wasn’t your answer ‘yes, yes, thank you, tell me where to go and I’ll be there?’”

Harry’s face and tone now reflected his frustration. “He was lying, Ron. About my chances of making the team. He wants me on the team, badly, because of the publicity. If I don’t fall off my broom repeatedly during tryouts, I’m sure to make the team.”

“Well, then, what’s the...” Ron trailed off as he suddenly understood.

“You want to be on the team, but you don’t want to make it like that,” said Ginny.

Harry nodded. “He lied about making the team, and he lied about it not mattering that I’m famous. And he lied a little when I brought up the danger; he knows I’d increase the danger, but he just doesn’t care; he’s willing to risk it to have me on the team.”

“But you’re good, Harry!” protested Ron. “You might make the team anyway! You know very well that Wood didn’t suggest you because you’re famous. He plays professionally, and if he says you’re good enough to compete for the position, then you are.”

“But what if I was the seventh or eighth-best Seeker, and they chose me anyway? I’d be taking a spot from someone who deserved it more. And if I weren’t the famous Harry Potter, he wouldn’t even be asking me, I’m sure of that.”

“That doesn’t mean you wouldn’t deserve it, though,” pointed out Ron. “Look at Krum, he hadn’t played professionally before he played for Bulgaria, and he was their starter and led them to the finals! Who’s to say you couldn’t do the same?”

“I wish you wouldn’t say that,” responded Harry, sounding more annoyed and louder than he meant to. “I’m tempted enough as it is, to just say yes, to take something I might not deserve.”

Ron gave Harry a ‘what’s wrong with you?’ look. “Well, I guess I should just shut up, then, because I don’t know what to say except for that.” He turned and walked into the kitchen.

Harry was even more frustrated, because he’d managed to upset Ron. He wanted to follow Ron into the kitchen, but felt that it wouldn’t be a good idea right then. Embarrassed, he looked at the others, who looked concerned and sympathetic. He headed for the stairs. “I just need to…” He trailed off, and walked upstairs to the boys’ bedroom.

He sat on the bed, frustrated and angry with himself. As he thought, he realized he was even more angry with Woodridge. Why couldn’t he just take me if I’m good enough and not take me if I’m not?, thought Harry. Do they really need me to make Quidditch more popular? What if I am good enough, and I don’t do it, I could miss a chance I’ll never get again. But what if I’m not good enough, get on the team anyway, have to play, and embarrass myself or let down the team? Not to mention that I wouldn’t have hardly any time, I’m going to be busy enough as it is, with everything else, plus Snape too… Snape would laugh, if he could laugh, he would when he sees this… poor Harry Potter, already with a wonderful partner, great friends, a good job, whining and feeling sorry for himself because he might get yet another good thing for the wrong reason, while Snape has to struggle to get by every day, no friends, nothing good in his life… yes, he chose the Cleansing, but he’s stuck with it now, and there’ll be times when he needs me and I’ll be off chasing this dream… oh, I envy Krum, he didn’t have all this to worry about, he

could just be a player, not a teacher, not someone with responsibilities to the Order... he probably didn't have to do hardly any schoolwork anyway, I'm sure Karkaroff didn't make him... wonder what happened to Karkaroff, if Voldemort ever found him, probably got a really nasty death if he was caught...

Harry's thoughts occupied him until he heard the sound of a toilet flushing from the nearby bathroom; he saw Ron walk past the bedroom door on his way back downstairs. "Ron, wait," he said; Ron stopped as Harry stood. "Could you come in here for a minute?" Ron nodded, came in, and sat on his bed, next to Harry's.

"I'm sorry, Ron," said Harry, embarrassed. "I shouldn't have been like that, I know you were just trying to be nice. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Well, there was an attempt on your life yesterday, and the wife of a friend got killed," Ron pointed out. "I know that has nothing to do with this, but it would be pretty strange if it didn't affect your mood, how you react to things. But I admit, I was like, 'what's with him?' You know how sensitivity's one of my real strong points." Ron grinned, and Harry did too, starting to feel better. "But, Hermione was there to explain it to me, as usual. She said she thinks this is something you always have a problem with, maybe getting things you don't deserve because you're Harry Potter. She reminded me of that conversation we had last year about you not feeling deserving. She thinks this is extra-frustrating for you because it's not clear; you could make the team because of talent or your name, and you wouldn't know which it was, which would taint it for you even if it was really because of talent; you would always wonder."

"Sounds about right. I would never argue with Hermione. And I guess what you said made it worse, because it reminded me of what it could be, if I could just be sure it wasn't because of my name. But I can't be sure, and I feel like it's already tainted, so I just didn't want to hear what you were saying."

Ron nodded sadly. "I didn't get that, of course, but I kind of understand it now. And the worst part is, you are good. If you weren't that good, you could just

think, they wanted me for my name but I'll say no because I don't want to embarrass myself. You have to wonder what would have happened if you had this talent but your name wasn't Harry Potter."

Harry shrugged. "I suppose I can console myself with the idea that he never would have asked in the first place if I weren't Harry Potter, so I never would have had the chance to find out." He sighed, then continued, "Hugo once told me that people envy his abilities, but they can be a curse; he gets to see the bad sides of people, the stuff they don't let people see. Lies, anger, desperation, all kinds of stuff like that, stuff he'd rather not see or know, but he can't help it. I just saw a tiny bit of what he was talking about. If I weren't a Legilimens, I would have believed Woodridge, I would have never known he was lying. I could have tried out, made the team, been really happy and blissfully unaware of the real reason. But no, I have to know the truth."

"So, you're definitely going to say no?" asked Ron, looking as though he was sad in advance at the answer he expected to hear.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure. And it's not only just that stuff, but what I said to him was true, too. I'm going to be so busy anyway; I really shouldn't be on the team unless I can devote full time to it, which I can't. So, I'll just have to be satisfied with doing things like figuring out a way to defeat Voldemort, and helping hundreds of young wizards defend themselves and eventually learn how to use the energy of love."

Ron smiled. "Just the usual stuff."

"And being saved by my friends," Harry added. "Which reminds me, I managed to not even thank you for saving my life. Which you actually did twice, in five minutes. That's pretty impressive."

Ron nodded his acknowledgment. "And the second one, ironically, I couldn't have done if you weren't a Legilimens. So I guess there was a good thing about it after all."

“Yeah, I know there are good things about it, too,” Harry admitted. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t whine about the bad things occasionally.” He paused, then chuckled. At Ron’s inquiring look, he said, “Eighteen classes...”

Ron chuckled as well. “One of my better ones, I admit. It’s funny because it’s true, she would’ve done that if she could’ve. By the way, Harry, we make fun of Hermione, even though we...” Ron paused, then sighed, “Oh, all right, even though we love her... it really is hard to get used to saying that... anyway, that bit about the heliopaths—”

“No, I’m sorry about that, too, I didn’t mean to say that you were being nasty. I guess I just felt guilty, because unlike with Hermione, it’s not the kind of thing we’d say to her face, we don’t quite know her that well. I guess one thing I got out of the Skeeter experience is the idea that it’s better not to do or say things outside someone’s presence that you wouldn’t with them around, because they could find out, and it’s probably just a better way to be anyway.”

“It’d be kind of hard to do that all the time, you couldn’t really talk about anybody,” pointed out Ron. “But with friends, yeah, I see the point.” Ron stopped talking as Hugo peeked into the room. “Hey, Hugo, come on in,” said Ron, who gestured Hugo to sit next to him on his bed, and Hugo did.

“Thanks. How are you guys doing?”

“You just ask that to be polite, right?” asked Harry, smiling. “I mean, you know exactly how we’re doing.”

Hugo shrugged lightly. “True. I guess I just say it because most people do, it’s more of a greeting, really. A lot of people say ‘how are you?’ when they don’t really care how you are. Also, in my case, it’s interesting to see the answers. A lot of people say ‘fine’ even when I know they’re very far from fine.”

“I guess that makes sense,” said Harry. “By the way, I wondered about something. Does your ability to detect moods work through walls, or do you have to be on a line of sight, like with Legilimens?”

Hugo looked impressed. “Most people don’t think to ask that question, but it’s a good one. Strangely, I need a line of sight to tell if someone’s lying, but telling a mood works through walls. I have no idea why. I assume you asked because you wondered how I knew it was okay to come up here.” Harry nodded. “Yes, when I first got here, I saw that the mood up here was serious, and they told me downstairs what had happened. I am sorry, Harry. Probably there’s no one better equipped than me to understand what that feels like for you. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve wished I didn’t have this ability. People often react to me in ways that would be equivalent to someone just coming out and saying to you, ‘I don’t like being around you, Harry, you make me nervous. I wish you would go away.’ It’s that clear to me. So while I’ve never been considered for the English Quidditch World Cup team, I have had very similar experiences to what you just had.”

“I can believe that,” said Harry sympathetically. “Do you mind if I ask, Hugo, are you married?”

“No, I’m not, and it’s partly for the reason you’re obviously thinking,” replied Hugo. “I know you’re trying not to use Legilimency on Ginny, or your friends, and let me tell you, it’s a very good idea. I have had relationships, but I can’t turn my ability off, and it always causes problems. I haven’t found a woman yet who can deal with my knowing exactly what she’s feeling, all the time. I haven’t given up, but it is difficult.

“But I see there’s another reason you asked, and that’s part of why I came over here. You wondered if I was married because of what happened to Dentus yesterday, you’re worried about it happening to me. I really appreciate it, but you needn’t worry. You know I know about all kinds of Order stuff, and obviously that makes me a prime target for Voldemort, if he knew I knew this kind of thing, which he might be able to guess. I have jewelry of the same kind as you do, with a few different properties. For example, mine can detect a Memory Charm being done, and the Aurors would be there right away. Rest assured that I’m very well

protected, and I live alone, so there's no one who's likely to suffer from their association with me."

"Thanks for letting me know," said Harry. "Last night I was lying in bed, trying to figure out who this was likely to happen to. All I could think of was you, and Pansy's parents."

"They're already protected, Harry," said Ron. "After Neville's grandmother was killed, her parents were given jewelry too."

"Have you met them, by the way?" asked Harry.

Ron's face reflected that it hadn't been a great experience. "Yes, and they're pretty much like she described them. Not rude, but definitely not friendly. Turns out they don't like her living here, but she's seventeen and she can live where she wants. They're lukewarm on me, though at one point when I was coming back into the room, when they thought I couldn't hear them, her mother said, 'well, at least he's a pure-blood.'"

Harry shook his head in sympathy. "I bet Pansy was pretty embarrassed."

"Yeah, she was, she kept apologizing after we got back. Probably kind of like what would happen if Ginny met your aunt and uncle, only not nearly so bad."

"Best if that never happens," agreed Harry. "So, Hugo, you're not doing an article about what happened to Archibald?"

Hugo's eyebrows went up. "You didn't see the paper this morning? I already did one."

"Hermione mentioned it later in the morning," said Ron. "She didn't say anything about it at the table because she figured you didn't need to be reminded of it."

"Very thoughtful," commented Hugo. "I talked to Kingsley, of course, and he said that you were pretty bad off, which I could have figured out anyway. I saw what happened, and I didn't really need quotes from you." Smiling, he added, "I would really love a few quotes from Dumbledore, though."

Harry and Ron laughed. “Yes, Ron saved me, then he saved all of us. I’m sure he would give you quotes, too, if it wasn’t a security issue. Of course, it would all be about mysticism, the afterlife, that kind of stuff.”

“Can you tell me, Harry, what does he say it is?” asked Hugo. “That’s not the kind of perspective I can get from most people, even with my abilities.”

Harry spent five minutes giving Hugo and Ron an overview of Dumbledore’s accounts of the afterlife. “Of course, he doesn’t know everything, because he hasn’t moved on to the spiritual realm, as he calls it,” concluded Harry. “He says there’s all kinds of... ‘systems of reality’, he called them, that he doesn’t know anything about, just that they exist, and are different places for spirits to go to have experiences. He says the whole... of everything, I don’t know what to call it, is so vast we can’t imagine it, but that our universe is like a drop of water in a huge ocean compared to what else exists.”

Hugo and Ron exchanged impressed looks. “I must say, Harry, I do envy you that,” said Hugo.

“I feel bad sometimes, because he tells me stuff, and a lot of it I don’t really understand so well,” admitted Harry. “He knows I don’t understand, and he’s really patient. He just finds a different way to tell me, or he tells me that I’ll understand it with time. Some of it is just really difficult to wrap your mind around.”

“I’ll bet,” said Hugo as he stood. “I should get going, I mainly wanted to reassure you that I’d be all right, because I had a feeling you’d be worried.”

“Say, why don’t you come to Diagon Alley with us?” asked Harry impulsively.

Hugo laughed. “Thank you, Harry, it’s nice of you to ask. But it’s probably not a good idea for me to be seen socializing with you. People might think my articles about you had a ‘point of view.’”

Harry rolled his eyes at being reminded of Skeeter. “I remember her saying that your articles about me had a ‘point of view,’ and it seemed like she was saying it just because you didn’t write anything nasty about me.”

Hugo nodded. "I disagree with her, of course; that was just a bit of projecting and self-justification on her part. I mean, you're not perfect, obviously, but you were chosen by a phoenix, which says a lot about the kind of person you are. She had to put a negative spin on you so she could justify to herself what she was doing. It wasn't as though I had to try very hard to not write much that was negative about you. I mean, I like you, and I can't pretend to be objective about that. But I do try very hard to keep my articles objective. Well... have a good time at Diagon Alley." They exchanged goodbyes, and Hugo left.

"I'd never thought about the bad points of having his abilities," Ron admitted. "I just thought, wouldn't it be cool to know so much about everyone. Probably it is sometimes, but I guess I can see where it would be a problem."

"I definitely can," said Harry. "So were we going to leave as soon as I was done with my little snit?"

Ron wore a 'don't say that' expression. "It's understandable that you'd feel this way. It's like you got offered something really great and then had it yanked away, it would be hard for anyone. And, you know, I should have apologized to you, too. I think I was acting a little like Mum was when she was getting on your back about your aunt. She wanted you to do what she thought was best for you, and didn't see that you had problems with it; I did that too. So, I'm sorry."

"Thanks," said Harry seriously. Then, trying to keep a straight face, he added, "You know, your mother gave me a hug after she apologized to me."

Ron responded, "C'mon, Harry, didn't you read that card I wrote you?" They both laughed. "Oh, by the way, we're not going straight to Diagon Alley. Apparently Kingsley wants to see all six of us, so we're going there first, then from there to Diagon Alley. Maybe there's new arrangements for being on call or something." Harry got up and followed Ron out.

In a meeting room at the Auror training center, Kingsley gestured for the six to sit, then did so himself. "The new term starts in two weeks, so I wanted to

discuss what we're going to do once that happens. Harry, of course, can Disapparate out of Hogwarts, so he can be on call like before. The rest of you... first, let me make sure, are you all okay to be on call, to the extent possible?" They nodded. "Thank you... I thought so, but I just wanted to be sure. Which of you go depends on where you are. If you're sleeping, Fawkes should get Ron and Neville, since they're in the same dormitory and can go together, whereas the girls are all split up. If whatever situation it is still isn't settled by then, he can get the girls one by one. If you're in classes or in the common room, most of you will be together; for example, if you're in classes, Ginny won't be there, and if you're in the common room, Pansy won't be there; with Harry's approval, Fawkes will go to wherever there are the most of you."

"That's fine, of course," confirmed Harry.

"Good. Bear in mind, we think calls will be very unlikely, especially now that Voldemort's going to be pretty spooked by Harry. But obviously, we still need to know what to do if something does happen. Harry, Ron, Ginny, if you're doing Quidditch practice when a call comes, stay on your broom, just stop and Apparate to the detection room while still on them, since as you know, you can't be moving when you Apparate. Ron and Ginny would take Fawkes, of course, and from there to the spot of the call. Being on brooms is an advantage in some kinds of combat situations because it gives you more maneuverability. Any questions?"

No one had any. "Okay, one more thing, then I'll let you go. I've already told all of you how much we appreciate what you've done, both in being on call and during the Apparation crisis. It's been extremely helpful, in both practical and morale-related ways, to know that we have you around if we need you. And we know that risking your lives isn't new to any of you, but you have done that in helping us as well. So, in addition to our thanks, we wanted you to have a more... substantial token of our appreciation.

"The crisis lasted a week, and some of you weren't there for all of it, but it could have lasted longer, and we know you all would have stayed on as long as it

took.” As he spoke, a chest in the corner opened, and well-crafted wooden boxes hovered out, one coming to rest in front of each of the six. “In recognition of that fact, we persuaded the Ministry to disburse to each of you one month of an Auror’s salary, which is four hundred Galleons.” Harry looked around to see his friends gaping, especially Ron, as they opened their boxes. He opened his, and saw the Galleons neatly arranged: twenty stacks of twenty, five across and four down, fitting exactly into the space of the box.

Obviously having noted their expressions, Kingsley added, “Let me be clear, this is not a gift. You earned this, all of you. We were going to give it to you at the end of the month, but that’s when you’re going back to Hogwarts. We thought you should have the chance to spend a bit of it, and since you’re going to Diagon Alley today... well, have a good time, all of you.” He left the room.

Harry’s friends exchanged amazed looks; Harry was sure he was the only one to have ever had that much gold at once before. It wasn’t so amazing for him, but he was very happy for them. I definitely have a feeling we’re going to have a good time in Diagon Alley, he thought.

CHAPTER 9

THE LAST CAR OF THE HOGWARTS EXPRESS

The last two weeks of the summer passed without incident, and much too fast for Harry, who felt as though he hadn't had enough of a chance to enjoy the summer. He resumed sessions with Snape two days after finding out about the Memory Charm, and resumed training with the Aurors at the same time, having six days of training before the summer's end.

Hermione arranged for the purchase of a computer and the necessary equipment to use the Internet, but soon after they received their payment from the Aurors, the six decided to contribute fifty Galleons each to pay for it. Arthur was extremely pleased, while Molly noted wryly that she would now always know where to find her husband. Phone service to connect the computer to the Internet would not be installed until the students' first day back at Hogwarts, but Arthur wasted no time in learning about the computer's functionality. "Amazing, the things Muggles come up with," Harry heard Arthur say twice. Harry decided to send Dudley a letter (not an owl) thanking him for the idea. Dudley wrote back with his e-mail address, prompting Harry to have to ask Hermione what e-mail was.

Harry had to write another letter, to Woodridge, politely declining his offer to try out for the Quidditch World Cup team. He could have called Woodridge in the fireplace, but preferred not to have to listen to Woodridge try to persuade him to change his mind, given the temptation the offer represented. He did have to field a fireplace call from a stunned Wood a few days later, and found it unpleasant to try to explain his reasons for declining while avoiding mentioning the most important one.

A week before the term started, Dentus visited Harry at the Burrow; Harry had offered to meet Dentus at his home, but Dentus refused to have Harry over even for a prearranged visit, fearing for Harry's safety. Dentus told Harry that he had decided to accept the position of History of Magic professor. Harry was pleased but also saddened, understanding that Dentus would have declined the position had his wife not died. Dentus pointed out to Harry that the position would keep him occupied as he coped with his loss, and would make sure he was around people, both of which he felt would be positive things at that time. Dentus reminded Harry of his promise to take his class, and Harry said that there would probably be a scheduling conflict with the classes Harry was teaching; Dentus said he would talk to McGonagall to see if his class could be arranged so that Harry could take it. Harry smiled, imagining Snape's reaction when told to make a last-minute schedule change.

On Saturday, the first of September, Harry had to go to Hogwarts for the first of his responsibilities of the year: the teachers' pre-term meeting. He recalled how intimidated he had felt at that meeting last year, and how he had bickered with Snape over the question of assigning detentions. He was pleased to recall that he had not had to give detention to anyone other than Malfoy. The meeting was scheduled for three o'clock, but he went to his quarters at two, then wandered around the castle, taking it all in. He decided to pay Hagrid a visit, and headed out to his hut.

"Jus' a minute," came the familiar shout when Harry knocked on the door, followed by the equally familiar barking. Hagrid opened the door and broke into a broad grin. "Harry! Come in, come in. Good ter see yeh. Have a seat." Harry started to do so, but Hagrid suddenly said, "Actually, if yeh could help me o' bit firs'..." Harry stepped over closer to where Hagrid prepared his food, wondering what the problem was.

"Could yeh... get the fire goin' for me?" asked Hagrid, embarrassed.

Surprised, Harry said, “Sure,” and pointed his wand at the burner. Flames suddenly burst out from below the pot of water.

“Great, thanks... er, could yeh make it a bit lower? Tha’s it, thanks.”

“No problem. How do you usually get the fire going?” It had just occurred to Harry that Hagrid’s hut wouldn’t have gas or electricity, but he did cook.

“Uh, the same way yeh jus’ did, usually,” Hagrid said confidentially, as he got down cups and tea bags. “Bin havin’ a problem lately, fer some reason. Can’ seem ter do any magic, like I jus’ don’ know how anymore. Strange thing...”

“That is strange,” agreed Harry. “Have you talked to McGonagall about it? Maybe she could figure out what it was.”

Hagrid looked reluctant. “Well, yeh see, technically, I’m not supposed ter be doin’ magic at all, yeh know,” he pointed out. “Rather not go talkin’ abou’ it.”

“I’d forgotten about that,” Harry admitted. “I’ve seen you do it often enough that it doesn’t occur to me. Do you think she’d have a problem with it? I mean, Albus never did.”

Hagrid looked at Harry in surprise, then nodded. “Hard ter get used ter yeh callin’ him that... jus’ sounds strange. Not sayin’ yeh shouldn’, o’ course, I know he wanted yeh ter. Anyway... I don’ know, jus’ don’ wan’ ter bother her. It’ll come back, I’m sure.”

Harry nodded, but made a mental note to ask Hermione if it was common for wizards to suddenly lose their magical ability temporarily; he had never heard of it. “I hope so. So, how’s Grawp doing?” Harry had visited Hagrid a few times during the summer, once with Ginny, but the subject of Grawp hadn’t come up.

“Better an’ better, thanks,” answered Hagrid enthusiastically. “Temper’s much better, hardly ever gets mad anymore. His English is really comin’ along, too, he can communicate real well, long as the conversation doesn’ get too hard. Would yeh like ter come fer a visit?”

Harry found the idea didn’t intimidate him like it would have a year ago, even though he didn’t completely believe Hagrid’s assurances about Grawp’s

behavior. "I would, actually, but I can't right now. The pre-term meeting's pretty soon, I just came early to wander around a bit."

"Ah, yes," said Hagrid, nodding. "Yeh know, Harry, sometimes I'm jus' as happy tha' I can' go inter the castle, 'cept fer the Great Hall," he confided.

"Meetin's, conferences... I'm happy jus' stayin' here, doin' what I wan' ter do."

"I can understand that," agreed Harry, smiling. "Probably most of the teachers wouldn't mind skipping stuff like that, they just don't have a good excuse like you do. But you will be there for the teachers' dinner tonight?"

"If it's in the Hall, sure," said Hagrid agreeably. "Don' mind talkin' to people, jus' the meetin's aren' so good. Good thing they don' have the meetin's in the Hall, so I'd have ter come."

Harry chuckled. "I'll be sure not to mention it to McGonagall, but I'd bet she knows how you feel anyway." Harry talked to Hagrid for another half hour, then left so he could be a little early for the meeting. He headed back to his quarters, and to his surprise, ran into Dentus, who was leaving his own quarters.

"Archibald! Good to see you. So, what do you think, so far?"

Dentus shook his head, looking around. "It's been forty-eight years, as I was telling Professor McGonagall last night, but Hogwarts has barely changed. Which is nice, I think; some things should stay the same." Gesturing to the quarters he had just left, he added, "She told me that these would have been your quarters last year, but you didn't need them, and you ended up with Albus's. Which has a nice symmetry, considering their plans for you."

"I don't know what I'm going to do yet," Harry pointed out.

Dentus nodded. "I know, that's why I said 'their plans,' not 'your plans.' Anyway, that's another good thing about this job, these quarters. There were so many things to remind me of Sarah at home, which there won't be here. Not that I won't think of her, of course, but I've recently become rather conscious of the difference between thinking and obsessing." Harry nodded, saying nothing, but soon found that Dentus knew what he was thinking. "Harry, do you remember at

that dinner, I made that joke about how bad you are at lying? Most of the reason for that is that your feelings show very vividly on your face, even if you don't mean for them to. I may mention Sarah from time to time, and I don't want you thinking that it was your fault every time I do."

"Sorry," said Harry, embarrassed. "It's just..."

"I do understand, I'm not trying to give you a hard time," Dentus assured him. "I know you're very young to be doing what you're doing. One of the things that came up in my conversation during dinner last night with Professor McGonagall was last year's attack on Hogsmeade. I know you suffered a lot from that, and probably what happened to Sarah is a little like that. Voldemort goes after you, and people... get in the way."

"I know," agreed Harry heavily, "and I also know that people would die anyway, even if I wasn't doing this. They'd just be different people, people I didn't know. It's just hard for that to make me feel less bad when something like that happens." He paused. "I've been looking forward to the school year, in a way, even though I was able to relax a lot during the summer... I guess I always look forward to the school year, because until this summer, I always lived with my aunt and uncle in the summer, and I couldn't wait to get away. But coming back here this year, I can't help but think there's going to be another Hogsmeade, something like that. If there is, I just hope I'm in the middle of it."

"I can understand that," said Dentus sympathetically. "I know you won't want to hear this, but a lot of us will want to be there with you. I didn't use a wand much in politics, but I'm no slouch."

"Thanks, Archibald. I'm sure you're not. So, how was your dinner with Professor McGonagall?"

"Very good," said Dentus. "We're more or less contemporaries, so we had a lot to talk about. I'm six years older than her; it turns out that I was a seventh year when she was a first year. You remember I said I was Head Boy; she told me she remembers me scolding her for running in the halls."

“It’s hard to imagine her running in the halls,” grinned Harry. “Of course, it’s hard to imagine her as being eleven. I should see if I can get her to show me some pictures sometime.”

“Somehow I doubt she would, but I suppose you never know. That dinner made me think, the one last year was with you and Albus. That must have been very nice for you.”

“I was kind of intimidated at first,” recalled Harry, “but not for long. He was always good at making people feel comfortable. It was really nice. He told me stories about Hogwarts... getting to know him the way I did was the best thing about being a teacher.”

Dentus gave him an amused smile. “Better than helping all these young wizards and witches learn how to defend themselves?”

Harry returned the smile. “That’s a close second. I will say, it is nice... last year, at the end, I got to see how far the students had come, how much they improved over the year. It was a good feeling.”

“I can imagine,” agreed Dentus. “I’m looking forward to that, too. At the end of the year, I’ll get to see how much they’ve...” Dentus trailed off, looking uncertain. “No, wait, it doesn’t work for me.” He then smiled to make sure Harry knew he was joking.

Harry laughed. “You’ll get to see them apply their knowledge of history. I have a feeling they’ll come out knowing a lot more than when they came in. I definitely have a feeling I will.”

“Thank you, Harry. By the way, just to let you know, I’m not expecting you to do the homework in my class.” Noting Harry’s raised eyebrows, he continued, “You’re only taking it because I asked you to; it’s not as though you need the N.E.W.T., and I really just wanted you to hear my lectures. I know you’ll have very little time as it is.”

Trying not to smile, Harry said, “I’ll get Hermione to read me the important parts of the textbook.”

Dentus laughed. “Like she does from the Prophet. You’re certainly lucky to have her as a friend.”

“In more ways than one,” Harry agreed. “So, Professor Snape was able to change the schedule enough so I could take your class?”

Dentus seemed to be trying not to smile. “Yes, though he did make a very dry remark about it being no problem, that he needed something to keep him occupied.”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh, but stopped after a few seconds. “Yeah, I knew he wouldn’t be happy about it. Well, I feel like I’m allowed to laugh, since he’s said more than once that he’ll be happy when I have to do it eventually.”

“Professor McGonagall did say last night that not having to do that anymore was one of the good things about not being deputy headmistress,” observed Dentus. “The bad thing, of course, is that she has to deal with politicians more than she used to.”

“I assume you had a bit of a laugh at that,” said Harry.

“Yes, we did,” agreed Dentus, as he gestured to Harry that they should head to the meeting, and they started walking. “We talked about politics for a while, and I told her some stories. They’re the type that would bore you, but she was pretty interested.”

“Maybe I’ll be interested in fifteen or twenty years,” suggested Harry.

“Even if I’m still around, it’s questionable whether I’ll still be able to tell them to you then,” said Dentus humorously. “I’ll be saying, ‘now, there was this man... oh, what was his name?’”

Harry smiled. “Somehow I think you’ll be all right.”

“I hope so.” They walked in silence for a moment, then Dentus said, “It’s strange to think about that long from now... you’ll have a nice, quiet life, and you’ll probably remember this as the most exciting time of your life, but the most difficult as well. Not that I think you’ll have nostalgia for it, but there’s an energy to it, caused by the dire circumstances, that probably won’t come again.”

“I really hope it won’t,” said Harry fervently. “I don’t know, Archibald. All I can tell you now is that I just want this to be over. Maybe some things are exciting; I guess I couldn’t deny that the Apparation crisis was kind of exciting, trying so hard to get out there really fast, and helping in captures. But that happened because two Aurors were killed, and it was just a fight we had to win. I’ve cried so many times for people who got killed... I feel like that’s what I’ll always remember, not how exciting it was. Right now, I really want to have a nice, boring life.”

Dentus put a hand on Harry’s shoulder for a few seconds as they walked. “I can very much understand that. Perhaps ‘exciting’ was the wrong word; maybe ‘intense’ would have been better. ‘Exciting’ has a positive connotation which is definitely not appropriate to this situation.”

They entered the staff room and sat next to each other, Harry exchanging greetings with some of the other teachers; everyone was there except Trelawney. Harry noticed that the large table at which they were sitting wasn’t usually in the staff room, and he wondered if it was conjured. He looked at the clock on the wall, which read two minutes to three. Sprout, sitting on his other side, leaned over and whispered, “Sybil likes to come exactly on time. She really does prefer it up in her tower.” Harry smiled a little and nodded. Harry noticed that Dentus was talking to John, who was sitting on his other side, and who thanks to Harry he already knew. McGonagall was sitting at one end of the table, Snape at the other.

At exactly three o’clock, Trelawney walked in and took the last seat, one of the two nearest Snape. “Excellent, we are all here,” said McGonagall, who Harry felt was trying to conceal annoyance at Trelawney. “Welcome to another year, everyone. It is good to see you all again. Before we begin, I would like to introduce the newest member of our staff. Former Ministry of Magic Undersecretary Archibald Dentus has kindly accepted the post of professor of History of Magic.”

Dentus exchanged nods with most teachers. “Has Professor Binns resigned?” asked Trelawney, clearly surprised. “I spoke with him from time to time; I would think he would not have left without informing me of his plans.”

McGonagall seemed to be trying to choose her words carefully. “He did not resign, as such, but it was clear that he intended not to return. He decided it was time to move on, and we must respect his decision. Now—”

“Excuse me, Professor,” interrupted Trelawney, as Harry was sure he saw irritation flicker across McGonagall’s face. “How was it ‘clear?’ I saw no portents, and I was his closest friend on the staff.”

McGonagall glanced at Harry, and was about to answer, when Harry put up a hand to stop her. “It’s okay, Professor,” he said to McGonagall. “I’m not going to tell most of the students, but I did plan to tell the staff at some point.” Looking at Trelawney, then others, he explained what had happened with Dumbledore. Like others he had told, they reacted mainly with awe, except Trelawney, who either didn’t believe him or was trying to appear unimpressed. “So,” he concluded, “he told me that Professor Binns wouldn’t be back, and I told Professor McGonagall.”

“Heavens...” said Sprout, amazed. “And he stays where he is to talk to you?”

Harry glanced at McGonagall, who answered the question. “As was his intention all along, he stays where he is to assist in the struggle against Voldemort. More than that I cannot say, for security reasons.”

There were more impressed looks. Flitwick shook his head and said, “I must say, if he can die and still help against Voldemort, then Voldemort’s in trouble.”

“That is the idea,” agreed McGonagall. “Returning to the topic, I wish to thank Professor Dentus for taking the position. In other personnel-related announcements before we get underway, the Head Boy and Girl this year will be Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff and Hermione Granger of Gryffindor.”

Harry had to fight off an urge to interject, ‘And if we were Aurors, money would be changing hands right now.’ McGonagall continued, “And as I am now the headmistress, I cannot continue in my role as Head of Gryffindor House; the new Head of Gryffindor House is Professor Potter.”

Harry got some impressed looks and a few smiles. “So, as a student and a Head of House,” said Sprout with amusement, “you could end up having to discipline yourself.”

Several teachers laughed, including Harry. “I hope it doesn’t come to that,” he replied. “I think I’ll try to talk to myself first, see if I can get myself to listen to reason. Knowing me, though, I doubt it’ll work.”

“You could have Hermione talk to you, on your behalf,” suggested John. “You would probably listen to her.”

“Fascinating though the ramifications are,” said McGonagall dryly, “we should get on with the meeting. Before we discuss our plans for the year, is there any business anyone wishes to discuss?”

“Yes, Headmistress, I have something,” said Snape, to Harry’s surprise. “It concerns the Slytherin Quidditch team. As you know, six of the seven members of last year’s team graduated last year, and the remaining player is inexperienced. I myself am not well versed in the nuances of Quidditch, leaving open the question of how new players for this year’s team are to be selected.”

“Couldn’t Madam Hooch do it?” asked Sprout.

“I discussed it with her; she informed me that she does not feel competent to evaluate talent,” said Snape. Looking at McGonagall, he asked, “I assume I may choose the person I wish to choose the team members?”

“If the person agrees, certainly,” said McGonagall.

“Thank you,” said Snape politely. “I would therefore request that Professor Potter choose the six new team members.”

Harry gaped in surprise, as heads turned and eyebrows rose. He looked at Snape as if not sure he’d heard correctly. “You’re jo— okay, you’re not joking,” he quickly amended, as he remembered who he was talking to. “But not only am I the head of Gryffindor House, I play on the Gryffindor team! I don’t think there could be a much bigger conflict of interest than that.”

“I am perfectly willing to stipulate the conflict of interest,” replied Snape calmly. “I remain confident that you will choose the best players possible; I am given to understand that those chosen by a phoenix possess a certain integrity of character. Or is that merely a misconception?”

Harry saw a few teachers smile; he gave Snape an annoyed look. “You’re just getting back at me for those comments about the schedule, aren’t you.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “Hardly. I chose you because you are the person on staff with the most Quidditch experience. However, your reluctance is understandable. No doubt you are concerned that you will do such a good job of selecting players that your hold on the Quidditch Cup may be threatened. I am sure no one would think less of you were you to turn down my request for that reason.”

Annoyed as he was, Harry couldn’t help but smile a little. Also smiling, Flitwick said, “Gee, Harry, do you think he’s trying to manipulate you?”

“No, he’s just getting in a few shots at me,” replied Harry. “He knows I’ll do it anyway. Okay, Professor, I’ll choose the best team I can, and we’ll still win the Cup.”

“It would hardly be a surprise, as your team is experienced, whereas mine will not be,” admitted Snape. “In three or four years, though, things may be different.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, they might,” he agreed. “And don’t worry, I’ll choose younger rather than older, other things being equal.”

“Just out of curiosity, why?” asked John.

“You always want to choose younger if you can, so the players can get more experienced and be better when they’re older,” explained Harry. “If I choose mostly second and third years, they’ll be pretty good when they’re sixth and seventh years.”

“Sounds like you’re going out of your way to be fair,” commented Flitwick.

Harry shrugged. “If I do it, I have to do it like I would if it were my team.”

“Well, that is settled, then,” said McGonagall, in an unmistakable ‘let’s move on’ tone. “Are there any other questions before we proceed?”

“Yes, I have a question, Professor,” said Harry, a thought suddenly having popped into his head. “Are there contingency plans in case the castle comes under attack?”

He got a few surprised looks. “What makes you think that’ll happen?” asked John.

Harry was surprised that John should have to ask. “I’m here,” he said simply.

“He tried hard to kill you last year, but he didn’t attack the castle,” John pointed out.

“And nothing has worked, so he might try,” argued Harry. “Besides, he’s had a whole year to prepare, he might have figured out a way.” Harry found he didn’t want to say what he thought was the most important reason Voldemort wouldn’t have tried it the year before: that Dumbledore was there then, but now was not. He knew McGonagall probably understood that as well, but saying it somehow seemed insulting to McGonagall.

“The castle is a highly secure environment, protected by many kinds of ancient magic, as you know,” said McGonagall to Harry reassuringly. “The founders made sure that this was so, and Hogwarts has never in its many-centuries history been successfully invaded. However, we do take the possibility seriously, and the Aurors have plans for its defense. I suggest you take up the matter with Mr. Shacklebolt if you would like further information.”

“I will, thanks,” he said. He specifically wondered what would happen with the students, how they would be protected. He also knew that many would want to join the fight, and he felt that at least sixth and seventh years should be allowed to. He decided on the spot to teach advanced dueling to the sixth years as well as the seventh years.

“If there is nothing else, then,” prompted McGonagall. “Very well, as usual we shall go around the table and get each professor’s thoughts as to how they will

approach their classes, from most junior to most senior. Professor Dentus, if you would begin.”

With a glance and a smile at Harry, Dentus said, “I never would have thought I’d be junior to a seventeen-year-old.” Harry smiled, as did other teachers. “Well, as I told the headmistress and the deputy headmaster yesterday, I plan to generally follow the established curricula for each year’s classes, but emphasize the current situation and link it to similar historical events. I am interested in having the students understand that we are in the midst of historically significant events, which will one day be written about in history books. I think it will help them to empathize with those who lived throughout other historically significant times.”

“Interesting, it sounds like a very good idea,” commented Sprout. “Will you be mentioning the fact that they’ll also be taking classes from a historically significant figure?”

Dentus smiled at Harry again. “Well, this particular historically significant figure tends to get embarrassed rather easily, so I shouldn’t answer here. But I imagine it’ll come up once or twice.”

“Come on,” said Harry to Dentus, annoyed and embarrassed. “If I dropped dead tomorrow—which, you know, could happen—then I wouldn’t be very historically significant, would I?”

Dentus gave a mild shrug. “Less so, I admit; I understand you haven’t exactly defeated Voldemort yet. But I was speaking more of the energy of love. If you died tomorrow along with your friends, then yes, the energy of love might die in its crib, so to speak, and your historical significance would be diminished. But if its use becomes even somewhat widespread, it will have great historical significance, even more so than if you defeat Voldemort. I see that you hadn’t thought of it quite that way.”

“I’m just busy trying not to be killed, it’s hard to think about things like historical significance,” said Harry, trying not to be obviously embarrassed.

“That’s why it’s good to take History of Magic, you can understand these things better,” teased Dentus.

McGonagall cleared her throat. “Well, amusing as it is to make sport of Professor Potter, we should stop there.” Harry had a feeling of gratitude until she added, “There will be plenty more chances throughout the year.” He gave her a long-suffering look as the other teachers laughed. “I apologize, Harry, that was hard to resist. Now, as you are the next most junior professor, the floor is yours.”

Harry paused for a few seconds. “I guess I’m going to do things similarly to last year—focusing on practical things—but even more so. Like I said, I’m expecting an attack on the school; at least, I can’t ignore the strong possibility. I want every student to be able to defend him or herself as well as possible. I’m going to focus strongly on dueling, real dueling, for the sixth and seventh years, maybe even start the topic for the fifth years. I’ll be teaching the Patronus Charm to anyone I think can learn it. Lots of emphasis on Stunning, Disarming, Protection, Impediment, that sort of thing.”

The other teachers exchanged glances, but said nothing. Finally McGonagall said, “That sounds fine, Professor. But I am sure you know that most of us are wondering whether you will attempt to teach students how to use the energy of love.”

“You, and everyone I came in contact with all summer,” said Harry. “I can’t answer it exactly, though, because it depends a lot on the reactions I get when it comes up in class. Obviously Hermione being able to use the new spells against Voldemort got people’s attention, and I understand that. But it’s going to be very difficult for a lot of people, which I’m going to tell them. And just because I was able to teach my friends doesn’t mean it’ll be easy to teach anyone else. Part of me wants to take it slowly, take a few years to try it out on different groups before I try it in classes. But I also know that it could save lives if even some people get it fairly quickly, like my friends did. In the classes, I’m just going to watch what happens,

and decide as I go. Professor Dumbledore was always telling me to use my intuition, and this seems like a good time to do that.”

McGonagall nodded. “As your intuition has provided you with two highly useful spells, I would not want to argue with it. John, your turn.”

As John explained that his course’s main change would involve making students aware of the Internet, Harry mentally drifted, wondering if he would actually be mentioned in history books. He had never contemplated such a thing before, even though at their first meeting Hermione had told him he was mentioned in books of recent history. He felt that it would be great in other circumstances, but as he had said to Dentus, all he could think about was how much he wanted a nice, boring life.

After the meeting, the group moved to the Great Hall for the teachers’ feast and social event, from which Snape was again absent. After the meal, everyone stood and circulated; Harry felt far more comfortable than he had at the previous year’s event, now that he knew everyone and was comfortable with them. Well, except Trelawney, he thought, as she took twenty minutes pressing him for details as to how he communicated with Dumbledore.

She finally let him go, after which he was approached by an obviously amused McGonagall. “I assume you heard that conversation?” he asked.

“Enough of it,” confirmed McGonagall. “It was clear even at the meeting, when you told the room about what had happened, that she was most put out. She clearly feels that you are treading on her territory.”

“But this has nothing to do with Divination,” pointed out Harry. “Albus doesn’t know the future.”

“It is close enough, apparently. It seems that anything... otherworldly is enough to draw her attention, and that she wishes Albus were talking to her rather than you.”

Harry shook his head. “Was she really that close to Professor Binns? I wouldn’t think so, if he didn’t even say goodbye to her.”

“I don’t know, really. All I can say is that they both tended to avoid the staff room.”

“Speaking of which, will we be seeing you in the staff room, now that you’re the headmistress?”

“Yes, I think you will,” she said. “I will still be teaching this year, and it will be more convenient than going to... I want to say, Albus’s office. He was here for so long, it simply seems like his, rather than that of the headmaster or headmistress. Next year, I will not be teaching, so I will probably spend more time there.”

“That reminds me, is there a portrait of him in there now, along with all the other ones of past headmasters?”

“Yes, there is,” she said. “Of course, it has no relationship to what you see when you talk to him at night; the portrait may not even know that you are unless you tell it. Then again, he did plan it, so it is possible. It will certainly not know what you talk about with Albus, though. You do understand that the portrait will not be quite the same as he was, though it will be similar.”

“Yes, I know,” he agreed. “Let me ask you, Professor... how does it feel, knowing that you’ll be the next one whose portrait goes up there?”

“I could ask you the same question,” she pointed out. “You could be after me. How would it make you feel?”

He hadn’t thought about that. “I suppose since I’d be dead, it wouldn’t matter much one way or the other.”

She nodded. “And that is exactly how I feel.”

“I understand,” he said. “Professor, do you think Albus will be written about in history books?”

“He already has been,” she pointed out. “But I assume you mean, in the ones written a hundred years from now. I’m not sure, Harry. But let me ask you: if he is, what do you think will be said about him?”

Harry thought for a moment. “It’s hard to say... history’s never been my subject, I’m not sure what they say about people in history books, only what they did. I guess it would say the same things that are on his Chocolate Frog card.”

“And how would you remember him to someone else, if you had to do it in only a few sentences?”

He thought again. “That he was a man of principle, that he did what he thought was right... and that it would be hard to imagine someone more kind, caring, and loving than he was.”

She smiled, emotion in her eyes. “Yes, exactly. That is why I feel that what is written about us in history books is not so important. What is important is how we are remembered by those we leave behind, and I know for a fact that even those who knew him far less well than you and I remember him the same way. That is surely as much as any of us can hope for.”

She drifted off to talk to someone else, leaving Harry alone with his thoughts. He was approached by Dentus. “I heard most of that, Harry, I was waiting to talk to you when you and she were finished. She’s certainly right, and I don’t think Albus could be summed up better than you did. But unfortunately, I come to bring you back down to reality, the here and now, the world of moral compromises.”

Harry gave Dentus a quizzical look. With a sly smile, Dentus continued, “Of course, that seems to be my role in your life. Anyway... I didn’t talk to you yesterday, but I’m sure you, or Hermione, saw in the Prophet that Rudolphus Bright was made Minister of Magic.” Harry nodded. “I spent some time before today’s meeting talking to old friends in the Ministry, and one of them said that he wanted to talk to me. Of course, everyone knows now about my relationship with you. I talked with Bright in a fireplace, and he wants to have a meeting with you. I explained our schedule today, and how busy you usually are, especially once the school year starts. He asked me to ask you if you would be willing to see him tonight, after the social event is finished.”

“Well, you did say this would happen,” said Harry resignedly. “I suppose so, better to do it now than once I get really busy. Does he want me to meet him at the Ministry?”

“No, Harry. He’ll come here. You can decide where to meet him; your quarters might be a good place.”

“He’ll come here? Why? I can just take Fawkes to see him, but he has to come through Hogsmeade, guarded by Aurors. Is there something else he wants to do here?”

“No, Harry,” Dentus explained patiently. “This is a gesture on his part, or you could say it’s part of political theater. In politics, where you meet is important. In your office? His office? Someplace neutral? He knows he could ask you to come to the Ministry, and you would. By coming here to meet you, he’s making a show of respect, for you and your accomplishments.”

Harry was impressed. “I didn’t know it worked like that. When should I meet him?”

“I talked to Professor McGonagall, and she said we would be finished here by about a quarter to eight, so eight seems like a good time. I can go off to a fireplace and let him know, and I’m sure he’ll be here by then.”

“Okay, that’s fine,” agreed Harry. “Do you have any advice for what I should say to him? Do you know why he wants to talk to me?”

“To answer the second one first, you’re one of the most important wizards in the country, right up there with he and Kingsley; he wants to have a relationship with you. I did tell you that whoever the next Minister was would want to be your friend. He won’t say that, he’s not that unobvious. If I had to guess, I’d say he’ll talk to you with an unusual—for a politician—degree of respect and honesty, because he knows what kind of person you are, and what will have a good impression on you. I don’t know exactly what he’ll say, but I do understand that his goal will be simply for you to think well of him. He almost certainly will not ask you to protect him; he knows that since you’re very brave, he won’t impress you by not acting bravely. As

for advice, I wouldn't suggest anything in particular to say to him. I wouldn't bother asking him his opinions on issues, since he would just tell you what you wanted to hear, and you're not that well versed in them anyway. I would say, just get a sense of how he presents himself, of who you'll be dealing with in the future, because you almost certainly will. You'll be fine. Just think of how Albus would have dealt with him. Be honest, be yourself, don't concern yourself with questions of how much power or influence you have, and you'll be all right. Okay, I'll go let him know. You should just go to your quarters a little before eight." As Dentus walked away, Harry thought about how ironic it was that most people would think it was a great honor to be paid a visit by the Minister of Magic, but he would just as soon return to the Burrow. He held up his hand to tell Ginny why he would be back later than he had thought.

Harry walked into his quarters at five minutes to eight, wishing that Ginny could be there with him. Not that she would want to talk to Bright either, but he always felt better with her around. Partly out of a lack of anything else to do, he sat and focused on love, much as he would before a session with Snape.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door; Harry stood and opened it with his wand. Rudolphus Bright walked in; Harry got a quick glimpse of Dawlish outside the door, providing security. Harry knew that Bright's age was forty-five, but he looked at least five years younger. He had brown hair with no gray in it, and was about the same height as Harry. "Professor Potter, Rudolphus Bright. I'm very pleased to meet you."

As he shook Bright's hand, what Harry particularly noticed was Bright's eyes; they were quick, intelligent, seeming to show more of Bright's character than a politician would want them to. Harry reminded himself that Dentus had said that Bright was very skilled with people, so he should assume that Bright could present himself any way he wanted to. "Thank you, Minister, it's nice to meet you. Please,

sit down.” They sat in the two chairs in which he and Dumbledore had sat a year and a day ago.

“Thank you for seeing me, Professor,” said Bright. “I know you’re very busy, maybe busier than I am.”

“Well, I will be starting tomorrow, but today isn’t so bad,” said Harry. “But I admit that I was surprised when I heard you wanted to see me. You were made minister just the other day; you must have a lot of things to do.”

“Yes, I do,” said Bright agreeably, “and one of those things is to see, and hopefully get to know a little, some of the people I’ll be working with, that I’ll be in contact with. You are high up on that list; you must know that.”

“Only because Archibald told me,” said Harry humorously. “I would have had no idea otherwise.”

“I guess that’s understandable,” said Bright. “You’re only seventeen, you haven’t had much time to get used to the idea that you’re an important person. But you are, of course. For me, this is like starting a new job and talking to the people I’ll be dealing with. You and I may not have anything to do with each other right away, but it seems inevitable that we will at some point, with me leading the Ministry, and you leading the fight against Voldemort. Also, we may know each other for quite a while. I could be Minister for a long time—at least, I hope so—and you’ll always have influence, be important. It just makes sense that we should get to know one another.”

“I understand,” said Harry, “but it doesn’t seem right to say that I’m leading the fight against Voldemort. I mean, there’s Kingsley, and Professor McGonagall, they’re the ones who make the important decisions.”

Bright smiled at Harry’s modesty. “They may be in charge, but you’re leading the fight. Leading is done by example more than with words; you don’t say a lot, but you do a lot. At the end of June, a whole class of students saw you go off to face Voldemort, your only concern being for Professor Dumbledore’s safety, and

for Mr. Longbottom's. Things like that are what inspire people to want to follow you. Whether you like it or not, you have influence, and you deserve that influence."

"Why do you say, 'whether you like it or not?'" wondered Harry. He was fairly sure he'd never said any such thing publicly.

"Well, now, I can tell just by talking to you," said Bright. "But of course I've read all the interviews you've done with the Prophet, and reading between the lines of what you say, it's not hard to tell. You'd just as soon do what you do and be left alone."

Harry nodded. "I... as Hermione would put it, I have 'issues' with fame."

"My only issue with fame is that I'd like more of it," said Bright with a self-deprecating chuckle. "Well, not fame as such, but just as it relates to political power. There is a definite correlation between being well-known and having power."

"I've never understood the appeal of having power," said Harry. As he spoke, he became aware of an odd feeling in his head, something fleeting, yet familiar, which he couldn't quite place.

"Spoken like a true Gryffindor," said Bright with a smile.

"I guess you were a Slytherin?" asked Harry.

"No, a Ravenclaw, actually," replied Bright. "Considering how ambitious I've always been, I could easily have been a Slytherin. But many people have characteristics that could place them in more than one House, and the Sorting Hat just has to pick which one it thinks is best. For example, from what I've read, Hermione could easily have been a Ravenclaw. The Hat must have just decided that her courage was more important than her intelligence, and clearly it was right."

"Can I ask you... to you, what's the appeal of having power?" asked Harry. As he asked, he decided to check Bright with Legilimens when he answered. He had practiced checking for lies enough at the Burrow over the past two weeks, and with the Aurors, that he felt comfortable that his checking would not be detected.

"Now, there's an interesting question," mused Bright, "and one I'm not asked all that often, because the answer seems to most people to be self-evident.

But...” Bright trailed off, a slightly puzzled look crossing his face. His eyes widened, and he looked at Harry with undisguised surprise. “You’re a Legilimens?”

Now Harry was surprised, and somewhat embarrassed, but nodded. “Professor Dumbledore taught me, or started to, before he died. He thought I needed it to be able to deal with Voldemort, who is one as well. But I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

Bright waved off his apology. “Please, Professor, you don’t have to apologize. If there’s any time you need Legilimency, it’s when you’re talking to a politician, especially one you don’t know. I completely understand.”

“I don’t mean anything about you personally,” Harry said anyway. “But I’m surprised you could tell; I thought I was good enough by now that people couldn’t tell, unless...” Now Harry was surprised, as he recalled something that Dumbledore had told him about Legilimency: that checking for lies could usually be detected only if the other person was a Legilimens as well.

“Unless I was one too,” said Bright, finishing Harry’s sentence. “Which I am. Had you noticed that I was checking you before?”

“I noticed something,” said Harry, “but I wasn’t sure what it was. I’m still sort of new at this, so I don’t recognize everything.”

Bright nodded sympathetically. “It’s a very delicate skill, which I’m sure you’ve noticed by now. You know, you’re the first person who’s caught me out with this. There are very few Legilimens, and I try not to check people until I’m fairly sure they’re not one. It never occurred to me that you might be, since you’re so young. But I shouldn’t be surprised, since you have enough power to do it, plenty of incentive, and an excellent teacher. I didn’t even know that Dumbledore was, though I had heard rumors.”

“If only people who are Legilimens can recognize it, then why do you try so hard not to be noticed?” asked Harry.

Bright smiled. “I can see why you wouldn’t have thought of this, but if it became publicly known, it would be the end of my career.” Harry’s face reflected

his surprise. “People would assume that I advanced by devious means,” explained Bright. “People are nervous around Legilimens, which is why we don’t make it known that we are. I would never have made it to this position if people had known.”

“I guess I can understand that,” said Harry. “Hugo has said that people sometimes react badly to him. But to tell you the truth—” Harry laughed, saying, “That’s kind of a funny phrase to use when talking to a Legilimens; you might think, ‘I’ll be the judge of that,’ but anyway, I’ve been considering going public with it.”

Bright’s eyebrows rose high. “Why would you do that?”

“It has to do with teaching people to use the energy of love,” explained Harry. “Ron was having a very hard time, and he asked me to go looking for stuff that might be stopping him. I did, and it worked. I might want people I’m teaching to know that I can do that if they want me to; it could be the difference between them being able to do it or not, and it’s the kind of thing that could save their lives.”

Bright looked impressed and doubtful. “I can see what you’re saying, Professor, but—”

“Please, call me Harry.”

“Thank you, and you should call me Rudolphus. As I was saying, I find it hard to imagine that many people would request it. You know very well what an invasion of privacy it is. People would have to want it very badly to allow that.”

“Rudolphus, practically everyone I’ve met this summer has asked me if I’m going to teach it. I think people want it pretty badly, and this would only be for people who asked for it, obviously.”

“I understand, but my point is that you would be making quite a sacrifice. People would react to you differently if they knew; at least, a lot would. I assume you’ve gotten to know Brantell fairly well; you should talk to him about it. I’m not saying you shouldn’t do it, just that you should think about it carefully. Maybe teach it for a while, see how it goes; maybe most people won’t need it. Letting it be known

would be a big thing.” Bright paused, then regarded Harry with a very serious expression. “I’d like to ask you, Harry... who, if anyone, do you plan to tell about this?”

Harry had to think. “My inclination would be to tell the other five, and Archibald; I can’t really think of anyone else who I would bother to tell. I assume you’d really rather I didn’t tell Archibald.”

Bright chuckled. “What I’d really rather was that you told not a single other person. It’s nothing personal about Dentus, who I respect and think is a good man. But I just don’t want anyone knowing, especially someone in politics. It’s easy to be tempted to use information in unethical ways.”

Harry frowned. “Do you mean that you’ve never used information you’ve gotten from your ability to advance in politics?”

“No, of course I have,” admitted Bright. “That’s how I know how easy it is to be tempted. I do try not to behave unethically, and you should feel free to check any of my answers that you want to. I don’t mind.”

Harry sensed that Bright was telling the truth, but that he had used the word ‘try’ for a reason. “Do you think it’s ethical to use this information at all, or only to use it when someone else is being especially dishonest? I mean, people can lie for privacy reasons, and they should be able to.”

“I know, that’s true,” agreed Bright. “And I have wrestled with the ethical implications of it, more than once. To answer your question, the more deceitful they are, the freer I feel to use the information I get. I’m not saying I have a right for nobody else to know, just a preference, one that I’m sure you can understand.”

“I suppose I do,” said Harry. “But with Archibald, the problem is... he may not be a Legilimens, but he can read my face very well. If I tell him about this meeting and don’t tell him this, he’ll know I’m not telling him something. I don’t want him feeling that he can’t trust me, and he can’t give me as good advice if he doesn’t know something like this. I do feel like I need his advice, it’s very important to me. I’m pretty lost in politics.”

Bright sighed in displeasure. "I see that, though I won't pretend I'm not unhappy about it. All right, but if you're willing, I'd very much like you to ask him, as a personal favor from you, not to tell anyone, and to check his answer with Legilimens. Will you do that?"

"Yes, I will," replied Harry. "And I won't tell my friends unless there's some very good reason. Except Hermione; she'd probably find out anyway, she's the one I practice with."

Again, Bright looked impressed. "I guess you really are close friends. You know that there are serious privacy issues with this. But, Harry, I know you're being truthful, but I'm getting the sense of a lie of omission. There's something else, a part of your answer to my question, that you're not telling me. I don't mention noticing things like that most of the time, but this is very important to me."

Now Harry sighed, knowing that Bright had noticed him omit any mention of the fact that Snape would find out. "There is one other person who's going to know, but everything connected with the situation is extremely confidential. I promise you that the information will go no further than this other person. I'm sorry, but I just can't tell you any more than that."

"Harry, I am now the Minister of Magic," pointed out Bright. "I can be trusted with confidential information."

"It's confidential as much for personal reasons as anything else," said Harry, hoping Bright would stop asking him questions before he stumbled onto something. "Trust me, I just can't talk about it. If you knew the situation, you would understand and agree. This is something that's important to the fight against Voldemort."

Harry got the sense of Bright checking his truthfulness. "I'm not happy with this, either, but I know you're telling me the truth, so I'll live with it."

"Thank you," said Harry sincerely. "By the way, just how common are Legilimens? Do you know how many there are?"

Bright shook his head. “There’s no way to know, since we don’t announce ourselves. My grandfather, who taught me, said he heard it estimated that it’s one in every five hundred to a thousand wizards. It sounds reasonable to me; I am very sure it’s not common.” He paused, then continued, “We got started on this because you asked me what I found appealing about power, and you considered my answer important enough to check, which you hadn’t done until then. I will answer, but I’d like to ask you first: why is it such an important question to you, considering that most people would find the answer obvious?”

“I don’t have positive associations with the idea of power,” said Harry. “Albus kept his distance from it, didn’t chase it. Voldemort thinks it’s all there is to life. Lucius Malfoy was able to buy it with money. And Cornelius Fudge abused it two years ago, used it as a weapon instead of a responsibility. So...”

Harry paused long enough that Bright finished his sentence. “If someone does chase it, you feel like you want to know why, what they plan on doing with it when they have it. It’s a very good question, Harry, and it’s been quite a while since I thought about it in those terms. The answer I would give if asked publicly, the standard politician’s answer, is ‘I want to do good, I want to help the people of the wizarding community, to create the best possible lives for them,’ and so forth. Now, on some level, that’s true. I do want to do good, and I think many people at the Ministry do, as well. I think most of us start out that way. But the real challenge is to reach a position where you can do good while not getting so corrupted by the process that you forget to do it when you get there. Power starts to become an end in itself; the reason to have it, just so one can keep it. That sounds like a circular answer, but it really is true. I’m sure Dentus would say something like this if you asked him. Power is so hard to get that it takes all of your effort just to get it, and keep it.

“I realize I haven’t exactly answered your question yet, but it is a difficult one, if you try to go beyond the obvious answer of ‘it’s good to have power.’ I suppose the answer that comes to mind right now is that it’s a way of testing myself,

that I want to see how well I can do with power, with this job. I really think I can do it better than it's been done recently, not just Fudge, but others before him as well. Maybe it's like you wanting to do well at Quidditch, or teach your classes well. I think I have talent at this—hopefully, not only at getting power, but at doing well with it once I have it. And I think I don't delude myself by saying that there's some level of unselfishness in it: after all, the person I'm replacing was killed for no other reason than that he had this job. The safe thing to do, and what some candidates did, was to pass on trying for it this time, and try again in the future, after Voldemort's gone. But somebody had to do it, and I decided I would. I still don't know if I've answered your question, but I think I've done the best I can. I will say that it's very possible to have power and not mess it up, even though that's not been your experience. Maybe your History of Magic teacher can tell you about that.”

Harry chuckled at the last comment. “I'll definitely ask him. And I appreciate your answering the question like you did. You could have just given me the standard politician's answer, and I would never have known the difference.”

Bright's expression suggested that there was something obvious that Harry wasn't seeing. “Dentus would. If I had, and you told him, he would tell you that I wasn't worth listening to, treating you like you were some idiot. And he'd be right.”

“But when it comes to politics, I'm not too far from that,” Harry pointed out.

“Especially considering your age, you don't deserve to be treated that way, though. Maybe you don't know about politics and couldn't be Minister of Magic, but I don't know about the energy of love, and couldn't face Voldemort without fear. You deserve to be treated with respect, no matter what the context. And in terms of talking to you, it's simple common sense, from a political point of view. I'm sure Dentus told you something like that.”

Harry nodded. “He said, ‘the next Minister of Magic is going to want to be your friend.’”

Bright laughed loudly as Harry smiled. “He’s absolutely right, of course. It must seem strange to you, but it’s a given to any politician. As I said was the reason I wanted to see you, you have influence, and as the Minister of Magic, of course I want to have working relationships with people of influence. That doesn’t mean we’ll agree all the time, but we probably will sometimes, and it’s good for each of us to know where the other stands. You see, Harry, there are different centers of influence in any society, and I’ll never be able to make all of them happy, but I’ll want to make as many of them happy at the same time as I can. For example, the Aurors have a lot of influence, and I want them to be satisfied with what I’m doing, which I can do by supporting things like the ARA. Now, I also want to keep business leaders happy, but they don’t like the ARA, because it costs them money. They grudgingly accept it, but you see what I mean. There are many such groups, in politics called ‘constituencies.’ Some are more powerful, some not so much, but I have to pay attention to all of them.

“Now as for you, you’re a very unusual constituency, from a politician’s point of view. My impression is that you’re going to be the constituency that wants me to... simply do what’s right, I suppose you could say. You’re not going to care about trade policies or business regulations, but if I do something that you think is just plain wrong, I think that’s when I’m going to hear from you. Does that sound about right?”

Harry couldn’t help but smile a little. “I suppose so, but it would have to be pretty important to me before I’d think to call you and tell you that.”

Bright nodded. “That’s as it should be, of course. You want to save your influence for what’s important. Now, that doesn’t mean that if you do, I’ll say, ‘you’re right, Harry, I’ll do it your way.’ I may recognize that what you suggest is the right thing to do, but it may be that I’ll upset a lot of powerful constituencies by doing what’s right. You’d be amazed at how often that can happen. I may say, ‘you’re right, Harry, but the problem is that I’ll lose a lot of support by doing the right thing, and I can’t afford that.’” His expression became more serious, and

Harry got the impression that to Bright, what he was about to say was the most important thing he would say in the meeting. “What you need to always keep in mind is that a politician’s political standing is the most important consideration in almost any decision, and that’s the way it has to be. I simply can’t do my job if I don’t have political support. Nine times out of ten, if I have a decision to make, I’ll make the one that gets me the most support. That may seem crass and self-serving, but it’s also the will of the people, as expressed through constituencies. People essentially put you into a position, then say, ‘do what we want you to do.’ For things I feel very strongly about, I can buck the will of the people and get away with it. But not very often.”

Dentus had said things like this, thought Harry, though he hadn’t made this point quite so specifically. “I’m wondering... what made you think that my main interest would be in your doing the right thing?”

“You were chosen by a phoenix, Harry,” said Bright. “There tends to be a consistency in the kinds of people phoenixes choose. Historically speaking, it’s extremely rare for a political leader to be chosen by a phoenix, and when it happened, it was always someone upon whom political power was thrust, rather than someone who sought it. Look at Dumbledore. People were pleading with him to be Minister sixteen years ago, but he wouldn’t do it, and he was right not to do so. He didn’t do it because he would have done what was right in every situation, not what was popular, and he would have slowly lost popularity and support until he eventually would have been replaced. Both Muggles and wizards have used the phrase ‘we get the government we deserve,’ and there’s a lot of truth to it. We certainly didn’t deserve Dumbledore. Anyway, I tell you this because there may come a time when you get upset with me for doing something that’s arguably wrong. I may agree with you in principle, but feel I have to make a decision based on politics.” Humorously, he added, “If I made my decisions based on what would be approved of by people who were chosen by phoenixes, I really wouldn’t last long.”

Slightly embarrassed, Harry smiled, but then asked, “If that’s true, then why am I a constituency? Why pay attention to anything I say?”

“See, you’re definitely not an idiot, Harry. That you ask that question shows that you’re absorbing what I’m saying. To answer, you have the support of people who admire your bravery; you’re like a symbol for what’s noble. Because of what you’ve done, some people will support you to an extent even if you say things they don’t agree with. If I do something you disapprove of so strongly that you feel you need to speak publicly, I’ll lose support. If I do the right but not-so-popular thing, like Fudge did with the ARA, I may ask you for support to help me do it. Either way, what you think and say will figure in my support in certain situations, so I have to consider it as a factor. That’s why you’re an important constituency.”

Harry shook his head. “I guess I understand; Archibald has told me some parts of this already. It all just seems so... I don’t know, like a big business deal or something. Things are decided on how much political support they have, not on...” he trailed off, realizing what he was about to say, and smiling a little as he did so.

“Not on whether or not they’re right,” finished an amused Bright. “See, that’s it, you’re that constituency. And I do see what you mean; part of me wishes it could be like that. I just know it can’t. I feel like, sometimes I’ll get to do what’s right, if I’m lucky. Maybe occasionally I’ll call you and ask you what you think is the right thing to do, in some situation. You’ll tell me, and I’ll say, yes, I can’t do that, but wouldn’t it be great if I could.”

They both chuckled, then Bright stood. “Well, I really should be on my way. I don’t want to keep you too long, and I want to visit Professor McGonagall before I leave. But I appreciate your taking the time to see me.”

“I’d imagine most people have time to see the Minister of Magic,” said Harry. “But I enjoyed talking to you. It was kind of like talking to Archibald; I learned a lot.”

Bright smiled. “That’s probably the most genuine compliment I’ve heard in a long time. Thank you.” He shook Harry’s hand and left. Harry silently summoned

Fawkes, who took him back to the Burrow, for his last night there before the start of the term.

* * * * *

Harry awoke at his usual time, glad that he had kept his sleep schedule similar to what it was at Hogwarts. At breakfast, he and his friends talked excitedly about the term ahead, though Molly was subdued, making a few comments about how sad it would be to have an empty home again. Hermione pointed out that they might be back again next summer, though Harry realized it would be less likely that all of them would be back if Voldemort were defeated.

After breakfast, they all went upstairs to pack, except for Hermione, who had done it the day before, and went to Harry, Ron, and Neville's room to be with Neville while he packed. Harry noticed Hermione at one point start to make a comment about what Neville packed, then stop herself; he wondered whether this was part of her effort to change the way she dealt with Neville. Harry half-seriously called Hermione over to ask which of his slowly growing collection of books he should take in his trunk, though he knew that if he didn't take a book and needed it later, he could always take Fawkes back to the Burrow and get it. Also, he knew that Dumbledore had a small library of personal books which was now his, in his quarters. He told Hermione she should feel free to visit his quarters any time and look at them, knowing that she would, and fill him in on the contents later. He knew he should look at them himself, but he never seemed to have the time. One of these days, he told himself.

After he finished packing, he took his trunk downstairs and sat on the sofa next to Ron. Hermione and Ginny were also there; Neville and Pansy were still packing. "So strange," mused Ron. "It's the last time we'll be doing this. It always feels like such a big day... still does, I suppose, but other things seem bigger now."

"You mean, like Quidditch?" teased Hermione.

Ron smiled. “Yes, exactly. Actually, I’m pretty confident about our chances this year. We’ve won twice in a row, and nobody else is that strong. If the Hufflepuffs get a decent Seeker, they could be a threat, but I still think we could beat them.”

“Hard to argue with that,” Harry agreed. “Oh, by the way, I forgot to tell you yesterday... at the teachers’ meeting, Snape asked me to choose this year’s Slytherin team.”

“And you said ‘no,’ right?” asked Ron, as though it were the only sensible answer.

“Sorry, Ron,” he replied, and related the details of the conversation. Finishing, he added, “I really didn’t feel like I could say no. Not because of what he said, but... I don’t know, it just seems only fair that every team should have the best players it can.”

“And he would have done the same for you, if your positions were reversed,” said Ron sarcastically.

“I know he wouldn’t have, but I don’t want to be that petty,” said Harry. “It did surprise me, though, that Madam Hooch thinks she couldn’t choose the team well enough. I wondered if she just didn’t do it because she doesn’t want Snape blaming her if they don’t do well.”

“Or, maybe because she just doesn’t like him,” suggested Ron. “Can’t imagine why, with the charming personality he has.”

Harry exchanged brief but meaningful glances with Ginny and Hermione, knowing they were all thinking that Ron might not say that if he understood Snape’s situation. Harry knew that normally he would have made a remark agreeing with Ron, but he decided to try to change the subject. “Hard to say. I still think we won’t have any problems, though, since they probably won’t be that good at first. With our two Firebolts, we’re going to be hard to beat.”

“Not to mention,” added Ron, “a Chaser who scored twenty-one goals last time, and a Seeker who could play on the Quidditch World Cup team.” Harry shot

Ron a look that was part anger, part sadness. Ron sighed. “Look, Harry, it is true. That twit Woodridge may have messed it up for you, but I really do think you would have made it anyway.”

“I think he knows that, Ron, at least at some level,” said Ginny, obviously sympathetic to how Harry felt. “It just reminds him of it, is all.” To Harry, she added, “I guess you probably won’t be able to enjoy the World Cup when it happens this summer, because of this.”

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “England may not make the finals anyway, then it wouldn’t matter so much. I suppose I’ll know how I feel when the time comes.”

“It seems safe to say that we’ll get to sit in the Top Box again,” said Hermione.

“I’m not sure,” said Harry. “I’m not about to go to people and say, ‘I’m Harry Potter, so give me good tickets.’ Even if someone offers, I’m not sure I’d want to take them. I don’t want people thinking I owe them something.”

“Harry, I think she means the Aurors,” pointed out Ron.

“Oh... right,” said Harry sheepishly.

“Don’t worry, Harry, we know you aren’t going to trade on your fame, nor would we want you to,” an amused Hermione assured him.

“I don’t know... Top Box...” mused Ron, deadpan, then glanced at Harry for a reaction, which Harry gave him by rolling his eyes.

“As his future wife, I could trade on his name,” teased Ginny. Adopting a dainty, helpless tone, she said, “Excuse me, but I’m the future Mrs. Harry Potter, is there any way you could possibly...” She stopped, enjoying Harry’s annoyed expression, as Ron and Hermione laughed.

“That voice is really not you,” said Harry humorously.

“Well, how about this,” she said, switching to a seductive tone as she walked to the sofa and sat on his lap, arms around his neck. “Is this me?” She kissed him vigorously as Ron hastily moved further away on the sofa.

“It sounds like her,” said Hermione, smiling. “What do you think, Ron?”

“I don’t know, I’m trying not to look,” responded Ron, with an exaggerated nervous expression.

Trunk over her shoulder, Pansy walked down the stairs, and chuckled when she saw Harry and Ginny. “I see things down here are as usual. Ron, why do you never kiss me like that?”

“You mean, in front of an audience?” retorted Ron. “Besides, she’s the one kissing him.” As Ginny continued the kiss, Harry reflected that little he did was without at least a potential audience, so it didn’t seem to matter much.

“It looks like he’s an active participant,” said Pansy, as Ginny finally broke off the kiss. “But I’ll keep that in mind.” She raised her eyebrows and smiled at Ron.

Harry looked into Ginny’s eyes. “Yes, that was definitely you,” he agreed, as she slid off his lap, remaining very close to him.

“Sorry, Ron,” said Ginny. “Well, not really. Just getting in one more, since it’ll be much tougher once we’re back at Hogwarts.”

“Yes, you would never have done it otherwise,” cracked Ron. “You’re so reserved about that most of the time. Now can someone tell me why, again, we’re taking Fawkes to King’s Cross, but not just taking him straight to Hogwarts?”

“Tradition, Ron,” said Hermione earnestly. “This is our last chance to do this, at least in this direction. There are so many memories associated with this, it’ll be nice. We can look at the countryside, buy stuff off the trolley...”

“Buy Chocolate Frogs, hoping to get Harry’s card,” grinned Ron, as Harry tried not to react.

“Oh, that’s right, you’d better take a quill, Harry,” said Hermione, opening her trunk to look for one. “They’ll be doing a huge business in Chocolate Frog cards, and if anyone gets yours, they’ll want it autographed. Or, some people might have gotten them during the summer.”

“Ah, yes, tradition,” said Ron, now enjoying himself. “Harry walking up and down the train, signing autographs. The fond memories...”

“I know,” said Harry. “We’ll get there early, get a compartment in the back of the train, and I’ll hide there for the whole trip.”

“Come on, Harry, it’ll be fine,” Pansy assured him. “There won’t be that many looking for your autograph.” Harry wasn’t so sure, and remained firm in his intention to stay in his compartment. He wondered if he could go five hours without going to the bathroom.

Neville came down, Molly and Arthur came in, and they all talked until ten-forty, at which time Harry wanted to leave. The others agreed, and Molly made the rounds, giving everyone a hug and a kiss. “Now, you all take care of each other,” she said, obviously worried.

“We always do,” Ginny assured her.

“And keep in touch,” instructed Molly. “If there’s anything happening, call me from the fireplace in Harry’s office.”

“We will,” said Ginny.

“And look after Pansy especially, she’s all alone in Slytherin.”

Pansy smiled. “Really, Molly, I’ll be all right. I mean, I don’t have friends like them in Slytherin, of course, but after April, it was fine. I’m not isolated.”

“Also, we’ve worked out a system to compensate for the fact that she can’t be with us in Gryffindor,” explained Hermione. “The other five of us usually sit together in the common room and do homework; we’ll do that, and Pansy can sit on her bed and do homework, and have an open pendant channel to the rest of us. We’ll be able to hear her, and she us.”

“Well, that’s very nice, I’m glad you can use the pendants for something like that,” said Molly. “Okay, I could probably think of ten other things to tell you, but you’d be late for the train. So, go ahead.” Harry felt bad for her, she looked so sad to see them go.

“Have a good term, everyone,” said Arthur.

“Okay, how are we going to do this,” wondered Ron. “I guess two trips, three of us each?”

“Sounds right,” agreed Harry. “Who first?”

“How about you three,” suggested Ginny, motioning to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “You’re the founding members of the group, you should go together.”

“I never thought of it quite that way,” said Harry. “But, all right.” He slung his lightened trunk over his shoulder, and picked up Hedwig’s cage. Hermione scooped up Crookshanks, but Ron paused as he was about to pick up his trunk, looking lost in thought. Then he walked over to Pansy and kissed her, in much the same way Ginny had kissed Harry a short time ago. The others exchanged pleased glances, and when Ron and Pansy finished, Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville broke into applause. Slightly pink with embarrassment, Ron walked back over to Harry and Hermione. He picked up his trunk and Pigwidgeon’s cage in one hand, and put the other around Harry’s shoulders as Hermione did the same. Harry gave Molly and Arthur a wave goodbye before grasping Fawkes’s tail. Fawkes took off, and they were gone.

The first thing Harry heard was a gasp, then a few others, as people on Platform 9 3/4 reacted to the sudden appearance of a phoenix bearing three people. Harry would have preferred to make a less conspicuous entrance, but using Fawkes had been the best thing to do from a security point of view. Harry let go of Fawkes, who disappeared, returning in a few seconds with Neville, Ginny, and Pansy. As they made their way along the platform toward the end of the train, Harry was intercepted by the mother of an embarrassed-looking Hufflepuff third-year boy; the woman asked whether Harry would be teaching his new spells. Harry asked the rest to go on without him as he answered her question, but Ginny stayed with him as the others moved off.

He and Ginny found the others five minutes later, in the last compartment of the last car. “Here you go, Harry, this is about as secluded as it gets,” said Hermione.

“Thanks, I could use some seclusion right about now,” said Harry as he took a seat next to Hermione.

“I guess so,” she said sympathetically. “That woman kept you all that time?”

“No, there was another one,” said Ginny. “The mother of a first-year girl, same question, of course. You should have seen the look on the daughter’s face, she was looking up at Harry with awe. It was really cute.” Hermione and Pansy chuckled at Harry’s discomfort with Ginny’s description.

“I tried to be polite, but I really didn’t want to spend all day explaining to them exactly what’s involved,” said Harry. “Especially the second woman... I didn’t want to say, ‘there’s no way I’m going to try to teach this to first years,’ but it’s close to the truth.”

“Well, you’re safe now, and we’ll Stun anyone who tries to come in here and talk to you,” said Ginny.

“Ah, if only you meant that,” responded Harry.

“We should head up to the front, sit with the prefects,” said Hermione, as Ron and Pansy got up along with her. “We’ll be back in an hour or so.”

“Say hello to the new Head Boy for me,” said Harry.

Hermione chuckled. “I will.” She picked up Crookshanks, and left the compartment with the others.

They sat in silence for a minute, enjoying the atmosphere and looking out the window at the still-busy platform. Ginny turned to Neville, sitting next to her. “How do you feel, Neville? About going back to school?”

Neville considered the question. “Funny, usually I used to be scared, or worrying that I forgot something. Now, classes don’t seem so important. Protecting Harry, helping the Aurors if we get called, that’s what feels important. The rest is just... something we’re doing in the meantime.” He paused, then continued. “You know... if you take out that one day, that one night... except for that whole thing, this was the best summer of my life.” He looked up at them, his shyness reasserting

itself momentarily. “I got to spend it with the rest of you, I got to do something useful. It was really good.”

Touched, Ginny reached over and put an arm around Neville’s shoulders. “Thanks. We’re really glad you feel that way.” Letting go, she asked, “Neville, you don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to, but... how are you doing, with what happened with Lestrangle?”

Harry had wondered that as well, but hadn’t wanted to ask; he wondered if she felt that he might be more open with fewer people around. Neville paused again. “A lot better. It’s taken a while; it’s obviously pretty hard to get past what she did, what kind of person she is. But I know, at least I assume, that if I want to use the energy of love, I can’t wish her dead. I have to know I wouldn’t torture her again if I could, no matter what she’d done. I asked Ron, and he said he wasn’t sure whether it was overcoming his embarrassment at saying ‘I love you’ or giving up on the idea of torturing or killing Malfoy that did it for him, but I have a feeling that Harry’s right when he says that you can’t feel that way and use the energy of love. I’m almost certain I couldn’t use the shield against Lestrangle when they were torturing me because I had so much rage. But she really does deserve to die. It was hard not to think that, not to want it.”

Harry could definitely understand that, and felt he knew how hard it must have been for Neville. “What really helped was something Kingsley did,” said Neville. “A few days after the Apparation crisis was over, also after Skeeter was killed, Kingsley took me aside. He suggested that I visit Lestrangle where she’s being kept, he would arrange it so I could see her privately, even though she’s supposed to be allowed no visitors, no one to get near her. He said that doing so might help my recovery from what happened. He also said that nobody except Aurors knew that we had her, knew who she was. At first I didn’t understand why he was telling me that, but while we were on the way to where they were keeping her, I worked it out.” Neville looked at each in turn, his expression very solemn and serious. “Without saying it directly, he was letting me know that if I wanted to, I could kill

her. No questions would be asked.” Ginny and Harry looked at each other, amazed, then back at Neville.

“I wasn’t even sure why I decided to visit her,” Neville said, now looking at Harry. “I mean, what could I possibly say to her? And I knew what she would say to me, there would be no point in asking her questions. But I decided to do it. Kingsley pointed me toward where they were keeping her, then left.

“The first thing I did when I saw her was a Silencing spell; I knew I didn’t need to hear what she was going to say. She just looked at me, like, you know I’d kill you the second I got the chance. I just didn’t say anything for a long time, a few minutes, just stared at her. I wasn’t even sure why, I just did. Then I suddenly realized why. Looking at her face all that time, it was... I guess like a mirror of what’s inside of her, how empty and terrible it must be in her mind. I didn’t feel sorry for her, of course, but... it was just like, something became really clear to me. There’s something about her that’s really wounded, that’s missing. Maybe a conscience, something like that, I’m not sure. I guess if you’re a Death Eater, it must be the case that something’s really wrong with you, period.” Harry couldn’t help but think how close Neville was to describing the consequences of the Cleansing.

“Finally, I decided to speak. I said, ‘You know, nobody knows you’re here but Aurors. I could kill you if I wanted. I could do to you what you did to my parents.’ She just looked at me with this expression of, go ahead, do it. I said, ‘You seem not to be bothered by the idea, which is a pretty good indication that you’re not all right. Any sane person wants to live, wants to not be in pain. Well, I’m not going to do that, because it’s what you would do, and the last thing I want is to be like you. Looking into your eyes for a few minutes is enough to tell me that. When Voldemort was attacking Harry in his dreams, in one of them Harry said that he pitied Voldemort. I didn’t understand why he said that then, but I do now.’ Then I just left. There was nothing else to say, or to understand.”

Proud of Neville, Harry just nodded. Ginny reached for him again, pulling him into a hug, which Neville returned. “Hermione’s very lucky to have you, you know.”

Neville smiled, embarrassed. “She said that too, after I told her this. All I know is, I don’t think about it so much anymore, I don’t feel like I need revenge against her anymore. Pity just seems like the right emotion.”

The train suddenly started to move, and they slowly pulled away from the platform. Harry looked out the window and saw parents waving goodbye to their children, some walking along with the train for a few seconds.

They were silent for a minute, then Harry said, “I wonder if Kingsley knew you would do what you did. You might have killed her, for all he knew.”

“I have a feeling he knew I wouldn’t,” said Neville. “I can’t be sure, of course.”

“If you had, Neville, do you think it would have ended your chances of becoming an Auror?” asked Ginny.

“I don’t think so,” Neville replied, as Harry had the same thought. “I think if I had, Kingsley would have seen it as justice, and not gotten worked up about it. I think he thought I deserved to have that chance. But Hermione thinks, and this makes sense to me, that he did it partly because he wanted to see what kind of person I was, what I would do. You know how there are these character tests when you become an Auror; she thinks that this was one, just an unscheduled and unofficial one.”

“I have a feeling that wasn’t what Kingsley intended, but yeah, he probably got the same kind of information he would get from one,” said Harry. “But to tell you the truth, Neville, it may be that he wanted to see what kind of person you are, but I think it’s more that he wanted *you* to see what kind of person you are.”

“That makes sense, too,” agreed Neville. “And also, the fact that I had her in my power, I could think of her and remember that instead of all the stuff she’s done to me. Like you with Malfoy, when you caught him.”

Harry nodded. "Unless they get away, that is."

"They're not likely to," said Neville. "I'm sure you know, some of them, including Malfoy and Lestrangle, are being held by the Aurors."

"No, I didn't know that," said Harry. "Why only some of them?"

"The Aurors can't hold them all, they only have about ten," explained Neville, "the ones who they think are most important, might know the most, or have the greater connection to Voldemort. The rest are being held by other departments of the Ministry. I think they don't assume that Malfoy has any special connection, though, just indirectly through his father. I also think that they're holding him out of consideration for Pansy."

"That would be nice of them," said Ginny. "Neville, since I've already asked you a highly personal question, would it be okay if I asked another?" Harry smiled a little as Neville nodded, conveying by his expression that she could ask anything she wanted. "How's it going with Hermione, how are you two doing?"

"You mean, with our issues after the Skeeter thing," filled in Neville. "I suppose she wouldn't mind if I told you. Fine, but maybe a bit slow. We're both trying to change our habits, and it's kind of hard. Her tendency is to tell me what I should do, and mine is to do what she suggests even if she's not telling me what to do, or to ask her what she thinks when it should be obvious. It's funny, you don't even realize you're doing things like that until you've already done them. Then you look back and say, 'oh, did I do that?' Or you do it, then you realize it the second after you did it. We decided we were going to change how we were, but neither of us realized quite how hard it would be. But at least we're doing it together, so we both know how hard it is, and neither of us gets mad at the other for slipping back into our old habits... well, not usually, but I guess we can get a little irritated if we aren't in a good mood, and it's not that hard for us to rub the other one the wrong way. But usually, we just make jokes about it, and try to do better next time."

"Well, I'm glad it's going okay," said Ginny.

“Yeah, so are we,” agreed Neville. “We still kind of shudder to think of what could have happened, if not for the message we got from Gran.” He looked up at Harry, gratitude on his face. “Not that we would have broken up otherwise, but it would have been much harder, we’d have gone through all kinds of grief trying to work it out, whose fault it was, and so on. And that would have been on top of our other problems—mine with Lestranger, hers with Skeeter. Both of us have had to deal with impulses we’d rather not have, and if we’d been fighting, it would have been so much harder. Instead, we were able to help each other. It’s been a pretty hard summer for us, emotionally, but at least we had each other. And, of course, the rest of you. You know, Harry, it meant a lot to her that you never got mad at her or blamed her once, when we thought Skeeter’s book and the other stuff was going to happen. She was really vulnerable, and you supported her when you had to have been pretty worried yourself.”

“Well, I had my own support system,” said Harry, looking at Ginny.

“I distracted him,” said Ginny.

Neville burst into giggles, then suddenly stopped. “Sorry. She told me about that, what you meant by that word. I hope that doesn’t bother you.”

“No, it’s all right,” Ginny assured him. “Besides, I only started using it because she said that you managed to distract her. I wasn’t sure that was what she meant, I just sort of assumed it. I think I was right.”

“By the way, where did you guys go to...” Harry trailed off.

Somewhat embarrassed himself, Neville smiled at Harry’s embarrassment. “Distract each other? My Auror quarters.”

“Really?” asked Harry, eyebrows rising high. “I didn’t know that. That was nice of them to let you use it for that.”

“I think Kingsley and Cassandra felt bad for me, that Hermione and I didn’t have much privacy at the Burrow, and they weren’t using the room anyway. We would take the fireplace from the Burrow when nobody was in the living room. Sometimes Aurors would see us walking from their fireplace to the quarters, and

they'd smile, but nobody ever said anything. I'd bet Cassandra told them they'd better not."

"Well, I'm glad you had someplace to go," said Harry. To Ginny, he asked, "I assume Ron and Pansy used the girls' bedroom?"

"Yes, but they used the boys' bedroom when you two were off doing Auror training," replied Ginny. "Made more sense."

"That's true," said Harry. "At least they got some privacy sometimes. That's going to be pretty lacking at Hogwarts, looks like it's back to the couples' places."

"Can't you still use your quarters?" asked Neville, surprised. "You can take Fawkes there, nobody has to know."

"That's not really clear to me," said Harry. "I know it was okay during the summer, but during the school year, I'm not sure how McGonagall would feel about it. It may be that she would think we shouldn't use it for that, or it may be that she'll just turn a blind eye towards it. I'm just not comfortable doing that, especially imagining a situation where she's looking for me, and that's where we are."

"Obviously, Harry and I differ slightly on this topic," said Ginny, giving him a teasing look. "I'm willing to take more risks than he is, but I do reluctantly understand why he feels this way. He is a Head of House, after all, and has to set an example. And that's probably not quite the example he wants to set."

"I wouldn't care, personally," clarified Harry. "I just worry about what McGonagall would think. Just for myself, students could spend all the time they wanted in the couples' places, or private rooms for all I care."

"Now, there's a very enlightened attitude," remarked an amused Justin Finch-Fletchley, stepping into the compartment, with Susan Bones right behind him. "Makes me wish I were a Gryffindor."

Harry smiled. "Hi, Justin, Susan, have a seat." He moved over as Justin sat next to him, Susan sitting opposite, next to Neville.

“Don’t worry, we’ll leave when the others come back,” said Susan. “We know the other three aren’t here just because they’re in the prefects’ car. We were just there, saying hello to people. You should go say hi, Harry.”

Neville and Ginny laughed. “That would involve him walking the length of the train, which is exactly what he’s trying to avoid,” explained Ginny. To Harry’s further embarrassment, she told Justin and Susan about him being stopped on the platform, and imitated the awed look the first year had given him, making everyone but Harry laugh. “I’d love to see the faces of his first year students at the beginning of his first class.”

“I’ll be sure to show you in the Pensieve, the next time I feel like being made fun of,” said Harry. Turning to Justin and Susan, he asked, “So, how are you two doing? Have you had a good summer, since the party?”

“Yes, we did, especially since the party,” said Justin, smiling and taking Susan’s hand. “The four of us ended up going out to dinner afterwards, and one thing led to another...”

“Oh, that’s great!” said Ginny enthusiastically, as Harry nodded. “So, you two are...”

“Seeing each other,” supplied Justin.

“Not getting the Joining of Hands done anytime soon, though,” added Susan, with a smile.

Harry tried not to roll his eyes. “You know, just because Ginny and I did it, doesn’t mean that we think—”

“I know, Harry,” Susan interrupted him. “I’m kind of teasing both you and Justin.”

“But that’s why I was interested in what you said about the couples’ places,” said Justin. “And the concept of ‘private rooms’ is definitely intriguing.”

Harry chuckled. “I’ll be in trouble if it gets back to McGonagall that I even said that. Well, not really in trouble, but she wouldn’t think it was funny, let’s put it that way.”

Justin and Susan stayed for a half hour, catching up with the others on news. Harry discovered that Susan's aunt was a friend of Bright's ("a political friend, not so much a personal friend," she clarified), and had supported him for Minister of Magic, so Susan was interested to hear Harry's impressions of Bright. Justin related that Ernie was getting "a little puffed up" about being Head Boy, but was confident that Ernie would get over it in time. Neville told them that Hermione's summer had been difficult enough that she had no chance to get puffed up about anything, but naturally he gave no details.

Ron, Hermione, and Pansy came back a little over an hour after the train had left the station. The trolley came by shortly after that, and they all bought food. Ron teased Harry by buying five Chocolate Frogs, but to Harry's relief, his card wasn't included in any of them. When the trolley came by again two hours later Ron tried to buy more, but to his great amusement discovered that they were sold out. His grin at Harry's expense grew wider when the woman pushing the trolley said that they had stocked five times the usual amount of Chocolate Frogs. "They must be trying to get the Merlin card," said Ron. "Yes, that must be it." Then an hour later, to his friends' further amusement, Harry relented and finally got up to go to the bathroom. A few people waved to him, but no one stopped him or asked him to sign his Chocolate Frog card.

Five hours into the trip, Neville looked out the window carefully. "We must be almost there," he said. He slid down in his seat and looked up out the window. "Oh, I just got a glimpse of one of the Aurors." Crookshanks, as if having understood, jumped onto Neville's lap and looked where he was looking.

"There are Aurors out there?" asked Ginny, surprised.

"Sure," replied Neville. "Four of them, on brooms of course, at all times. It's pretty well understood that this train would be a huge target, both because it has Harry and the rest of us, and because it has three hundred people, who they'd love to kill all at once. They accompanied the train to and from Hogwarts last year, as well."

“But that only helps if the train is attacked,” said Hermione. “What if they’d put a bomb on the tracks, set it to go off when the train passed it?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Neville, “but I’m sure they thought of that. I would say that’s not something that Voldemort would try, except for what he did with Crabbe and Goyle. Anyway, my guess is that they wouldn’t bother trying, since the train is such an obvious target that they have to imagine that the Aurors would have it well protected. I think when they try something, it’ll be in a way and at a time that we won’t be expecting.”

There was a pause, then Harry commented, “It’ll be kind of nice this year, I’ll get to sit at the teachers’ table for the whole ceremony, not like last year. I missed the Sorting Hat’s song and the Sorting last year. At least—”

The compartment door opened and Hedrick and Helen burst in, clearly having run. “Professor!” exclaimed Hedrick.

Harry was slightly alarmed, as were the others. “What is it?”

“We just found out, we heard people talking... some first years... one of the first years on the train is named Marcus Avery,” said Hedrick breathlessly.

“Some people are saying his father is a Death Eater.”

Harry exchanged glances with the others, concerned. “His father is one of the ones you named in that article for that Quibbler magazine,” added Helen.

The name was familiar to Harry, of course. “Do we know for sure that that’s his father? Could it be someone else with the same last name?”

“We don’t know for sure,” admitted Helen. “But I heard that someone asked him what his father did, and he wouldn’t say, just said he didn’t know. That sounds pretty suspicious.”

“This is really bad, Professor,” said Hedrick, whose expression suggested to Harry that Hedrick felt he was understating the case. “We thought there were no more of them, and now, there’s one more... he could be under the Imperius Curse, he could have a bomb... what are we going to do?”

“First, let’s not panic,” said Harry firmly. “We have no idea what the situation is. I’m sure Professor McGonagall knew this when he was invited to attend Hogwarts. His family situation could be different, he could be being raised by someone else, for all we know.” Hedrick and Helen still looked very anxious. “Look, I’ll start looking into it tonight, I promise. I’ll talk to Professor McGonagall, and to the Aurors if necessary, find out more about his background. But I really don’t think he has a bomb or anything like that. He’s only eleven, and even if they had control of him, they wouldn’t consider him reliable. They would wait to try to use him. If he is the son of that Avery, he’ll probably get put in Slytherin. Pansy, you can check him out after the Sorting. Talk to all the first years, see how he seems.” Pansy nodded.

“Is there anything we can do, sir?” asked Helen.

Harry thought for a minute. “Yes, there is. Be friendly to him.”

Helen and Hedrick gaped. “What??” asked Hedrick.

“Listen to me,” instructed Harry. “This is very serious.” He made sure he had their complete attention, then continued. “It’s true that he may be a tool for the Death Eaters. But he also may not be. It may be that his father wants him to help the Death Eaters, but he doesn’t want to. Anything could be the case. We have to imagine that there’s a chance that if they’re telling him to do things, that he doesn’t want to. There’s a chance that they want him to be a Death Eater in the future, but he doesn’t want to. If other Slytherins treat him badly, suspiciously, excluding him because of his name, he’ll be angry and upset, and that’ll push him to want to be a Death Eater. Death Eaters thrive on negative emotions. But if he makes friends, if he’s treated like everyone else, if he has good experiences, he might see an alternative to being a Death Eater in the future. My point is, right now, we just don’t know. It’s not going to hurt to give it a try. I’m not saying be extra nice to him, nicer than the other first years, but just treat him the same way you’d treat any other first year. Talk to all of them, be friendly with them. It’s the best thing to do, and if he is

a danger, doing that will probably help you find out faster, as well. Let's just find out what's going on first."

"He's right," added Pansy. "Look at me, I used to be pretty nasty before I decided I wanted to change, and Harry trusted me, gave me a chance when he didn't have to. We have to find out what he wants to do. He may not know yet, and it's better to encourage him in the right direction. Do you think you can do that?"

Hedrick and Helen looked at each other, clearly finding the suggestion a hard one to get used to. "We'll try," said Helen. "We'll go back to the others, tell them what you said."

Pansy nodded. "Thank you. I'll talk to you all tonight, after the Sorting and the feast. We'll all go to the boys' dormitory, have a talk about this. Okay?"

They slowly nodded, and started to leave. "Hedrick, Helen... thanks for letting us know about this," said Harry. "I know you're concerned for me, and I appreciate it. I promise, I don't take it lightly." They nodded again, and left the compartment.

Harry looked at the others. "Well, what do we think?"

He expected Hermione to respond first, but she didn't. "I think you did the right thing," said Neville. "Obviously we have to be concerned, but you didn't emphasize that so much because they're already very concerned."

"No point getting them more worked up than they already are," agreed Harry. "And that was a good idea, Pansy, talking to them later."

"I just want to make sure they're all on board," she said. "Those two will go back and tell them what we said, but it won't have the same effect as hearing it from us. About the situation, yeah, I'm a little concerned. After last year, it'd be stupid not to be. But I really don't think they're going to use an eleven-year-old for that kind of thing. Like you said, too unreliable. If they thought he was going to be an asset, they'd wait, give everyone some time to get used to him. So even if nothing happens at first, we still have to keep an eye open."

“The second years are going to do that, no matter what,” said Harry. “But yes, you’re definitely right. I just hope the other seconds, or even the firsts, don’t start treating him badly once they find out.”

The train started slowing down. “Ah, almost there,” said Ron. “Should be seeing Hagrid any time now.”

“Well,” said Harry, “instead of taking the carriages, I think I’ll have Fawkes take me into the castle. I want to ask Professor McGonagall about Avery, and see if I have time to talk to Archibald about my chat with Bright yesterday. I suppose I could talk to him tonight, but I’d rather just go to Gryffindor Tower after the feast. There may be enough time.”

“One of us is going to have to take a different carriage than the others,” pointed out Hermione. “They only seat four.”

“Pansy could sit on Ron’s lap,” suggested Ginny.

Pansy chuckled on seeing Ron’s annoyed glance at his sister. “I’m sure you’ll work something out,” said Harry. The train came to a complete stop, and the others let Harry go first to get his trunk and Hedwig. He stepped out of the train and opened Hedwig’s cage, knowing as she flew off that she would go to the Hogwarts owlery. He waved at Hagrid, and grabbed Fawkes’s tail.

In his dormitory, Harry put down his trunk and Hedwig’s cage, and mentally thanked Fawkes for taking him. He walked out of the dormitory into the empty common room, imagining it full, as it would be later in the evening. He walked over to the portrait hole and swung the portrait aside, then climbed through.

“How did you get in?” asked the Fat Lady, annoyed.

“Magic,” said Harry over his shoulder.

“If he can do that, there’s not much point in my being here, is there?” the Fat Lady said to herself as he walked away.

Harry knocked on the door of McGonagall’s quarters, having found her location on his Hogwarts map made by Hermione last year. The door opened. “Ah,

Harry come in,” McGonagall greeted him. “I see you decided to skip the carriages this year.”

“There was something I wanted to ask you about, and then I wanted to talk to Archibald about my meeting last night. Bright said he was going to talk to you too, how did that go?”

“Just fine, thank you. But his meeting with me was an afterthought, for the sake of courtesy. You were the one he came to see.”

“That seems hard to believe,” Harry protested. “You’re important; you’re the Hogwarts headmistress, and you help lead the Order.”

“Yes, but I do not have political influence, as you do,” McGonagall explained patiently. “My words will not move people to action, or sway public opinion. In any case, Harry, I am sorry to be inhospitable, but there are things I must do before the ceremony. What did you wish to ask me about?”

He quickly explained what the second years had said about Avery. She nodded. “Yes, his father is the Death Eater. We did look into the situation, of course. The father seems to have separated from the mother; he apparently left when Voldemort returned, and has not been back to her since. We made a few discreet inquiries, and discovered that the mother has told those she knows that she did not know her husband was a Death Eater, and was appalled to find out. We do not know for certain that this is true, but it is verifiable that the father has had little or no contact with Marcus for over two years. Professor Snape and I find it highly unlikely that Voldemort will try to use him as he used Crabbe and Goyle last year. We assume that he will be Sorted into Slytherin, and if so, Professor Snape intends to observe the situation closely.”

“Okay, thanks,” he said, satisfied. “I was sure you knew about it, but I just wanted to know what was going on. I’ll let you get back to the stuff you have to do.” He quickly exited her quarters.

He found Dentus in his quarters, and talked to him for fifteen minutes. Apart from his amazement in discovering that Bright was a Legilimens, Dentus

found nothing remarkable about their conversation. When Harry relayed his favorable impression of Bright, Dentus nodded and said, "I told you, he's good. Now we just have to wait and see what he actually does, with regard to fighting Voldemort." Harry agreed that though it hadn't come up in the conversation, that would be a large part of how he would decide whether or not he approved of Bright.

It was ten minutes before the ceremony was to begin. Harry headed to the Hall, ready to take his seat a little early, but stopped at the room in which he had waited for Dumbledore's dog at this time last year. He looked into his hand. "Where are you?" he asked.

"Sitting in the Hall, we just got here a few minutes ago," Ginny replied.

"Are any of the teachers sitting at the table yet?"

"A few," she replied. "Sprout, John, Sinistra, and Flitwick. Oh, here comes Vector. Why?"

"It's still a little early, I just wanted to make sure if I went and sat down, I wouldn't be the only one. I'm surprised Snape's not there."

"He's the deputy headmaster now," she pointed out. "He'll be meeting the first years as they get off the boats, and taking them up here."

The thought 'those poor first years' flashed through Harry's head, and he wondered if she had the thought too, and neither said it because Snape could view it later. "That's right, I forgot," he said. "Well, I guess I'll go out there. Too bad I can't talk to you like this from my seat at the teachers' table."

In his palm, he saw her smile. "No, it wouldn't look good," she agreed. "We'll save a spot for you, you can join us for some of the feast. I love you."

"I love you, too," he said, and put down his hand. He walked out to the teachers' table, looking for the nameplate indicating his spot. He found it to the left of the podium, near the end, between Sprout and John. He greeted them both, then looked out into the Hall. It was dark outside, and as always, the ceiling was enchanted to look like the night sky; many stars were visible. Also as usual,

hundreds and hundreds of candles hovered high in the air, providing light; he wondered whether in addition to being charmed to hover, they had also been charmed not to drip wax onto the heads of the students below.

Harry chatted with John, telling him about the computer he and his friends had bought for the Burrow and relating Arthur's excitement about it. John laughed, finding it easy to imagine. "I wish I could have a computer here, just to show people in my classes how it works, but electronic equipment doesn't work around Hogwarts."

Hagrid came into the Hall and made his way up to the teachers' table, saying hello to Harry and the others as he walked by them to his seat. Other teachers drifted in; McGonagall and Trelawney arrived at about the same time, and everyone was there. Within seconds, the Great Hall's doors opened, and in walked Snape, followed by about forty intimidated-looking first years. They walked up to an area near the teachers' table, off to Harry's left. Harry now saw the familiar stool, the Sorting Hat on it, looking as old and worn as ever.

Many first years gasped as the Hat opened its... it wasn't a mouth, thought Harry, but he thought of it as one. It started its song, which seemed to Harry to be a lot less jaunty than in other years. The Hat sang:

For near a thousand years now

I've performed this simple chore

To sing of Hogwarts' history

While trying not to bore

And then you'll put me on your heads

I know not what I'll find

But once you do, I'll take a little

Peek inside your mind

*I'll get a look at who you are
And very soon I'll know
What your strong points are, and then
Into which House you'll go*

*The ones who'll go to Ravenclaw
Are clever, sharp, and fast
The ones who'll go to Gryffindor
Have courage unsurpassed*

*The ones who'll go to Hufflepuff
Give everyone a chance
The ones who'll go to Slytherin
Know just how to advance*

*Now, o'er the years and centuries
Advancement's been our aim
But generations come and go
And magic's much the same*

*A brand-new potion here and there
An upgrade for a charm
A few new uses for a plant
A new way to disarm*

*But one time in a great long while
There comes a seismic shift
The world of magic shakes and stirs*

There's continental drift

From chaos unexpectedly

An island will appear

Where kindness, love, and peace of mind

Make everything so clear

And anyone, from any House

This island you can find

The energy, the path, is in

Your heart and in your mind

The trail's already been blazed

By one, and then by five

And many more now have the chance

To seek, and find, and thrive

In centuries I've never sung

A song just quite like this

But so rare an opportunity'd

Be such a shame to miss

So keep in mind that you may know

What you think you do not

And what you think that you don't have

You have already got

A chill ran through Harry as the Hat stopped singing. He asked himself, did that song mean what I think it meant? He almost couldn't believe it. He glanced down the table at the other teachers, most of whom were looking at him. Then they started applauding the Hat, as was customary, and he joined them, feeling awkward doing so.

He felt his hand tingle. "Can you believe that?" he heard Ginny say, obviously as amazed as he was. "That song was about the energy of love!" He felt he couldn't reply in his hand, as he was in full view of many students, and because of the song was probably being looked at more anyway. He found Ginny with the others in the crowd, and nodded slowly. He found he was looking forward to reviewing the song in the Pensieve later, as he had only gradually realized what it was about as he was listening.

Snape looked nonplused, but recovered quickly, and turned to face the first years. "Your names will be called in alphabetical order. When your name is called, sit on the stool and put on the Hat. When the Hat announces the name of your new House, take off the Hat, place it back on the stool, and proceed to the proper table." He picked up a parchment scroll, and read the first name.

"Avery, Marcus!"

A small boy, though average-sized for his age, stepped forward. He had light brown hair and slightly narrow eyes. He sat on the stool and put on the Hat, looking nervous, but no more nervous than the other first years. The Hat paused for ten seconds, then fifteen, then twenty; Harry found it a good sign that the Hat hadn't put him into Slytherin instantly, as it had Malfoy. Finally reaching a decision, it shouted, "Slytherin!" The Slytherin table applauded, though in a somewhat more reserved way than they had in years past, Harry felt. He wondered how many of them had heard about Avery's father.

Snape read the next name. "Barrington, Joseph!"

A slightly larger boy with black hair walked up to the stool, and excitedly put the Hat on his head. This time, the Hat only paused for a few seconds. "Huff—"

With the suddenness of a light being turned off, two things happened simultaneously: the Hat went silent, and all of the hovering candles plummeted to the floor.