

CHAPTER 1

AN OWL GATHERING

On a mild day in late July, a teenager was walking home from the downtown area, such as it was, of Little Whinging. The city did not have a train station, a department store, or even a large supermarket; just a few dozen shops, a bank, a police station, and a library. It was the library from which soon-to-be-sixteen-year-old Harry Potter was returning, with an old bookbag around his shoulder. He looked around from time to time as he walked. It looked as though he were admiring the trees and bushes, which had recovered nicely from last year's drought, but he actually was wondering whether there was anyone following him. Or, more precisely, whether he could catch a glimpse of the person he knew must be following him. All he could see, however, were the normal sights of a suburban neighborhood, and a few people looking at him rather oddly as they passed him. Harry briefly wondered why—after all, he was not exactly famous in this area, nor was his scar—until he realized that looking around to see if you were being followed was not exactly usual behavior.

Harry did not particularly care what constituted usual behavior, probably because his Aunt Petunia constantly badgered him whenever he did anything outside of her strict notions of it, even when it was harmless. He was also used to people staring at him with a kind of sad look on their faces. In the wizarding world, the one in which he spent most of his time and considered his true home, it was because of the lightning-shaped scar on his forehead and what it represented. In this, the Muggle, or non-wizarding world, it was because of his normally shabby and ill-fitting clothes. Petunia and her husband Vernon usually refused to buy him

any new clothes, always giving him clothes that his cousin Dudley was finished with, regardless of the fact that the two boys' builds were very different.

Harry knew that his clothes could not be the reason for any stares today, though. His clothes, for the first time he could remember outside the wizarding world, fit properly and made him look perfectly ordinary. In early July, a few days after he'd returned home for the summer from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Petunia had abruptly told him to get in the car, and without a word had taken him to the next town's second-hand clothing store, and picked him out a pair of jeans and a couple of shirts, all the while looking at him as though a great honor was being done him which he absolutely did not deserve. Harry knew that it was not spending the money that bothered her—the Dursleys had more than enough money, which they spent lavishly on Dudley—but rather the fact that she felt obliged to do it at all. Harry said little throughout the whole excursion, with a simple “thanks” to Petunia after she paid for the clothes. She ignored the gesture as she headed out to the car, leaving him to follow.

It was clear to Harry, though he wisely did not venture this opinion to his aunt, that she was buying him clothes because of what some of his friends in the wizarding world had said to the Dursleys when they had come to pick Harry up at King's Cross at the end of the most recent term. Remus Lupin, Arthur Weasley, Nymphadora Tonks, and, most threateningly, Mad-Eye Moody had told the Dursleys in no uncertain terms that if Harry were “mistreated” in any way, the Dursleys would have to answer to them. The Dursleys seemed to have taken this warning to heart, especially as they were unsure that they would have the same notion of what constituted “mistreatment” as did the wizards who gave them the warning. As a result, Harry was having the best, or rather, least unpleasant summer he'd ever had at the Dursleys. He was allowed to watch TV if someone else was watching it first, though his aunt and uncle had a tendency to leave a room soon after Harry entered it intending to stay for a while. He was not asked to do any chores, though he learned not to be around while Petunia was doing them, as she

tended to throw him very nasty looks while she worked, no doubt resentful that she couldn't make him do the work that she had in summers past. She had even grudgingly acquiesced when he asked her to sign the form so that he could get a library card, which he was sure she never would have done before. The sole price he had to pay for this was a steely silence from all three Dursleys, and even that was better than the irritated bluntness with which he'd always been addressed by them.

Thinking of this caused him to feel a surge of gratitude toward Moody and the rest as he walked home, and he even forgot about trying to spot who was following him. It was for his own protection, he knew, though that did not make it any less irritating at times. Professor Dumbledore had increased Harry's protection a little over a year ago when Lord Voldemort had returned from near-death. Harry knew that Voldemort considered Harry's death a high priority, now that he would no longer be able to deceive Harry with false visions as he had a month ago, leading Harry to a confrontation at the Ministry of Magic, in the Department of Mysteries. That confrontation had one very positive effect—the wizarding world knew without any doubt that Voldemort had in fact returned, and was now mobilizing against him. It had also, however, led to the death of Harry's godfather Sirius Black, the adult to whom he'd felt closest in the world. Harry knew that there were many who would have felt that it was worth one life to vastly strengthen the opposition to Voldemort, but he personally would have given anything to somehow reverse what had happened.

Almost a month after Sirius's death, Harry still felt the loss keenly, even though he was over the worst of his mourning. For the first three weeks after returning to the Dursleys', he was completely withdrawn. He stayed in his room almost all the time when not eating, and spoke only when he had to. Last July, after Voldemort came back, he had felt restless, like a caged animal, desperate to know what was happening in the outside world; this July, he didn't care. Owls from Hermione and Ron didn't cheer him up, and he wrote only brief, desultory responses.

Harry stopped and looked around the street, then up at the partly cloudy sky, and wondered where Sirius was, if he could be considered to be anywhere. It was not something he had thought that much about before, even though both his parents were dead; that had happened so long ago that he was more or less used to it. He was not at all used to Sirius being dead, and it was rare that an hour went by that he did not think of Sirius. This was what had prompted his interest in the library; he had walked up to the counter and said to the librarian, “I’m looking for books about what happens to people after they die.” The librarian gave him a sad little smile—was it that obvious that he’d lost someone?—and led him to the books on religion and spirituality. Harry had spent some time glancing through them, and picked out three that seemed to speak to what he was looking for. He knew there were no solid answers, of course, but he wanted to get a sense of what the possibilities were. He looked up at the sky, wondering if there was such a thing as heaven, and if there was, would Sirius like it there? It sounded very pleasant, but a little boring, and he knew Sirius would want to be someplace where there was action, something interesting happening. Harry knew that he would probably never know for sure, but as he looked at the sky, he hoped Sirius was happy, wherever he was. He had gotten a bad deal in this life; he deserved better in the next one, if there was one.

Such thoughts still consumed Harry’s attention as he entered the Dursley residence, which was officially his home but did not feel like one to him. It was a little past three o’clock, and Petunia was walking through the house putting away laundry. Harry glanced into the living room to see Dudley playing video games. He smiled and gave Dudley a cheerful wave, to which Dudley responded by flinching and returning to his video game with increased focus. Harry knew that he’d been a bit malicious, in that Dudley had been terrified of him since last summer, when a dementor attack meant for Harry had almost killed Dudley. Harry knew that Dudley had ample reason to know that Harry had not been responsible for the attack, and even that Harry had saved Dudley’s life. Harry also understood,

however, that Dudley knew that the most traumatic event in his life would never have happened had Harry not been around, and that was enough for Dudley to not want to ever be around Harry, even at the dinner table. Given his past experiences with Dudley, this suited Harry fine.

Harry walked up the stairs to his bedroom and put his bag down onto the bed. He looked up at the owl cage to say hello to Hedwig, but it was empty. He wondered why she was gone; since it was daylight, she couldn't be hunting. He found himself hoping he might be getting mail; he had discovered that Hedwig had a way of anticipating when one of his friends wanted to write to him but had no access to an owl. Since Ron had his own owl, Pigwidgeon, Harry suspected that he might get mail from Hermione, who did not live in the wizarding world during the summer and so could not always find an owl. Harry found himself wondering how Hedwig could possibly know enough to go out and seek mail for him, and then he thought, probably the same way that owls know how to find the recipient of any letter. He then idly wondered what would happen if he wrote Sirius a letter and told Hedwig to deliver it. Would she refuse to even try? Would she go straight to twelve Grimmauld Place, Sirius's last residence? Or would she search the earth forever, always looking but never finding? It was this last possibility that stopped Harry from considering the idea further.

His reverie was interrupted by a flash of light, followed by the sudden appearance of Fawkes, Professor Dumbledore's phoenix. Harry had seen Fawkes disappear in a similar fashion, but never appear; he sat up in bed, curious. Fawkes glided over to him and dropped a letter into his lap. Harry opened it; it read, 'Would you mind a short visit? You can give your answer to Fawkes, he will understand it.'

Harry wasn't sure he was in the mood for a visit, but he felt he should say yes. He nodded, even though he assumed Fawkes wouldn't understand the gesture. "Tell him I said yes," he said to Fawkes, who disappeared a second later. He didn't know what he would say to Dumbledore, but he figured that Dumbledore had something to say to him, or else he wouldn't be coming.

He barely had time to think any more than that, as a few seconds later, Dumbledore appeared in the middle of the bedroom, accompanied by the popping noise of an Apparation. "Hello, Harry. May I?" he asked, gesturing to the bottom of the bed. Harry gestured for him to go ahead, and Dumbledore sat. Regarding Harry with compassion, Dumbledore asked, "How are you doing?"

"All right, I guess," replied Harry, not in the mood to go into detail about how he had felt since returning from Hogwarts. More because he felt as though it was expected than because he really wanted to know, he added, "How about you?"

"Reasonably well, thank you," said Dumbledore politely. "I have been very busy, of course. Now that the Ministry has accepted the fact of Voldemort's return, there has been much for me to do, for the Order to do in assisting the Ministry. The Order will continue operating independently; it is more that we are bringing the Ministry up to date. But it has not been a good time, of course. Sirius's death has weighed heavily on me."

Harry felt by looking at Dumbledore's face that this was true, but he still said, "You fought Voldemort before. You must have lost lots of people."

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "Yes, I have. But it never becomes any less painful. Especially when, in such a case as this, there was so much I could have done to prevent it."

Harry looked down uncomfortably. Part of him didn't want to talk about Sirius's death, but he didn't want Dumbledore feeling the way he clearly did. "It wasn't your fault, Professor. I don't blame you for what happened."

"Thank you, Harry, I appreciate that," said Dumbledore sincerely. "The fact is that on reflection, I accept that. What I said right after it happened was said in the emotion of the situation. I blamed myself, as I tend to do when someone for whom I have taken responsibility is killed. Now I understand, of course, that it was no one's fault. That is, no one but the one who performed the act itself. As for the rest of it..." Dumbledore paused to collect his thoughts. He turned his head to look Harry in the eye, and continued, "We all do our best, and things happen that we do

not expect and did not foresee, even if after the fact it seems obvious in retrospect. It is useless to spend time blaming ourselves. It is also unavoidable, and very... human. In time, we learn to accept the truth.”

Harry looked down again, wondering whether Dumbledore was referring to himself or to Harry. Maybe both, he thought. Lost in thought for a minute, he looked up at Dumbledore, who seemed perfectly content to sit in silence. Finally feeling as though he should say something, he asked, “Was there a reason you came here, Professor?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “It is nothing to do with Hogwarts or the Order. I just wanted to visit you, to see how you were doing.”

Harry thought to respond, ‘You couldn’t have done that last year at this time?’ but it seemed too rude. Even so, he couldn’t help but say, “So, you don’t think it’s dangerous to look at me anymore.”

Even though the words themselves were neutral, Dumbledore looked down, as if chastised; Harry half-realized that his tone and expression had made the statement an accusation. “I am sorry about that. I know it must have seemed to you as though I were indifferent to your situation; I hope you will believe me when I say that I was deeply concerned. I placed a priority on your safety which came at the expense of your emotional well-being, and I now feel I may have taken things too far in that direction. I was... afraid for you. I can only say that I will try to make it up to you, if you will allow me to do so.”

Harry found he was embarrassed at Dumbledore seeming to find it necessary to ask for his forgiveness. “You don’t have to make anything up to me, Professor. I just... hope you’ll tell me things instead of not telling me things. I don’t get scared that easily, and I’d rather know what he’s trying to do to me, so I can fight him.”

Dumbledore nodded. “That is one of the ways I plan to make it up to you. As for right now, there is simply not much to report. Voldemort is still keeping a low profile, but now that the Ministry is mobilizing against him, that will probably

not continue for long. You have my word that you will be kept informed of any developments.”

“Thank you, Professor,” said Harry.

There was another silence, as Harry again felt he should say something, but couldn't think of anything. Seeming to sense this, Dumbledore stood. “Well, then, I believe I will be getting back. If there is anything I can do for you, please do not hesitate to send Hedwig along.” Harry nodded, and Dumbledore Disapparated.

Harry lay back down on the bed, staring at the ceiling. He had spent much of the past three weeks doing that, but he now had something new to think about.

A week later, as Harry was returning from the bathroom to his bedroom, he heard the phone ringing downstairs. He would have ignored it, but had a strange feeling that he should see who it was. He headed downstairs as he heard Petunia say “Hello?” followed by “No, he isn't,” in an irritated way that suggested that he was somehow involved. Harry looked up at her, expectantly. His aunt appeared to be struggling, weighing her natural desire not to want Harry to have any outside contact with what she considered “those freaks” against the possibility that one of those very people might be on the other end of the line, and unhappy that they were not allowed to talk to Harry. She silently handed the phone to Harry and walked away.

“Hello?” Harry said uncertainly. He had hardly ever spoken on the phone before.

“Hi, Harry!” a familiar female voice said excitedly. “It's me, Hermione!”

“Hermione! Wow, I'm really surprised. I never get any calls. I was wondering who could possibly be calling for me.” Harry sounded very pleased, which he was.

“Well, I was thinking of sending an owl, and Hedwig just showed up, but I thought that since we both have phones, I'd give this a try. Also, I know how it is for you in the summer, being all alone, well not really alone, exactly, but you know what I mean...”

“It’s very close to that, trust me,” Harry said emphatically. As he looked around to make sure he wasn’t being overheard, he added, “They usually give me a hard time about one thing or another, but this summer it’s been more like I’m a bomb they’re afraid of setting off. They have as little to do with me as possible. Not that that’s a bad thing, compared to usual. It has to be because of the warning Moody and the rest gave them.”

“Yes, I was just thinking that,” Hermione agreed. “In fact, I was wondering whether they’d let me talk to you at all. Your aunt said you weren’t home at first. Well, anyway... I was going to ask how you were doing, but I guess you’ve kind of already told me, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it. Just counting down the days until we’re back at Hogwarts and trying to keep busy. There’s not that much to do around here.”

“You could always read ‘Hogwarts, A History,’” she teased.

“I suppose I could,” Harry answered, as if she were serious. “I’ve been meaning to do that at some point, believe it or not.”

“Oh, and speaking of days,” Hermione continued, “I just wanted to say ‘Happy Birthday!’”

“That’s not until tomorrow,” Harry pointed out, though no less pleased that she’d remembered. He wondered if the date was in one of her homework planners.

“Oh, I know, but we’re talking now, and anyway, you might be busy tomorrow, who knows. I just wanted to make sure to say it before it was over.”

“Busy?” Harry laughed. “I thought you said you knew what it was like here! I can’t imagine any day here being busy.”

“I know, but you just never know,” said Hermione. “Better to do things sooner rather than later.”

“Yeah, I think that homework planner you got me might have mentioned that once or twice,” Harry said with a chuckle.

“Well, I’m just glad you’re using it. That reminds me, that’s another good reason for Hedwig to have shown up, I can send you your birthday present. I was going to send it by Muggle post—”

“No, not a good idea,” Harry interrupted her. “Anything sent to me by Muggle post is going to be intercepted by my aunt and uncle, and probably thrown away, unless I happen to get to it first. Definitely use Hedwig. Anyway, at this point, she’ll be annoyed with you if you don’t.”

“Yes, she seems to be looking at me suspiciously right now,” agreed Hermione. “Unless it’s my imagination.”

“Probably not,” Harry answered. “She’s given me dirty looks plenty of times when she thought I wasn’t treating her with the proper respect. Anyway, thanks for the gift, whatever it is. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

“Oh, it was nothing. So,” and here her voice changed, as though they were now getting to the important part of the call, “have you gotten your O.W.L. results?”

Harry suddenly realized that, important as that was to most students, he hadn’t given it a thought all summer. “No, I haven’t. Are they late getting them out? I did think we’d have them by now.”

“You really don’t have yours? Strange, I’d have thought they would send them all out at once, but I got mine two days ago.”

“Yes, that is strange,” Harry agreed, but he was not really bothered. He was curious to know how he did, but was not burning with the need and desire to know, as he assumed Hermione would be. “So yours are all Outstanding, I expect?”

“No, they aren’t,” replied Hermione, sounding wounded. Harry’s eyebrows shot straight up. “Nine Outstandings and one Exceeds Expectations.”

Harry thought to make a comment regarding the fact that most students would be thrilled with such a result, but he knew Hermione better than that, not to mention that he could tell that she was deeply upset. He felt that he had better tread carefully. “Which one is the Exceeds Expectations?”

“Actually, Harry, I was wondering if you could guess which one it was.”

Harry looked blank. How could he possibly know? He told her as much.

“Okay, let me put it this way,” she pressed him. “Which exam had unusual conditions?” At Harry’s silence, she continued, “During which exam was anything happening that could affect the students’ concentration?”

Harry blinked in surprise. “History of Magic? But that happened at almost the end of the lesson. That shouldn’t have--”

“No, no, not History of Magic,” Hermione said, and Harry could tell that she was getting impatient, so he concentrated on his memories of all the tests. In a moment it came to him.

“Oh, Astronomy,” he said, finally understanding.

“Yes, Astronomy,” she confirmed. “Astronomy, during which there was a huge ruckus going on right in our field of vision, not to mention that a good friend of ours was being attacked. Really, we lost a good twenty minutes of that exam.”

Harry understood that she was right, but he honestly couldn’t get that worked up about it. He was not going to need an Astronomy O.W.L., so for himself he didn’t care, but he knew this was not the right thing to say to Hermione. She needed him to be worked up on her behalf.

“Yes, we did. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if I failed. It really isn’t fair. Still, considering what happened, Exceeds Expectations is really good. I’ll bet no one else in the group did that well.”

This was obviously not quite the response she’d been hoping for. “Yes, you may be right, but that’s not the point! We’re supposed to have one hour for the exam! One uninterrupted hour! The school and the testers are supposed to give us proper testing conditions, and they didn’t do that! It wasn’t a fair test!”

“Yes, but all of us took the test under the same conditions, so it all comes out the same, doesn’t it?”

Hermione sighed loudly, exasperated but trying to control her temper. “No, Harry, it’s not like in Quidditch, where if it rains it doesn’t matter because it rains on

both sides. My Astronomy O.W.L. won't only be compared to yours and Ron's and everyone else's who took the test that night, but to everyone who took the test in past years and will in future years. They got the right conditions. We didn't."

Harry thought this over for a few seconds. "Yeah, I suppose you have a point," he agreed. "But what can we do? The test is done, we have our results. Well, you do, anyway."

"What we can do, Harry, is file a complaint with the O.W.L. testing board, and apply for a retest for anyone who took the test that night and wants it. I've already filed the initial complaint, and now I have to get a petition together, signed by all the students who want to take the test again. As I understand it, it doesn't exactly matter how many students sign; the decision will be made on the merits. Still, I'm really hoping that if most or all of us sign who were there that night, they'll be more likely to give us a retest. So, I know you don't have your results yet, but I was really hoping..."

"So, if you sign the petition, you commit to taking the test again, and if you do worse the second time..."

"...that's the result you're stuck with." With more than a hint of a plea in her voice, Hermione said, "If you want to wait to get your scores, I'll understand, but—"

Harry interrupted her. "No, it's okay. I'll sign it, no matter what my score is." He knew it was possible that his gesture could cost him an O.W.L., and would probably cost him some extra hours of study, but he'd come to realize that sometimes you did things for friends that you wouldn't normally do. He also knew that even if he ended up managing a pass, he couldn't look Hermione in the eye and protect his score by refusing to help her.

"Oh, thank you, Harry! Thank you so much!" she squealed from the other end of the phone. "This means a lot to me, and especially since you don't know your scores yet, it's really great of you to do this."

"I assume that you're going to be sending owls to everyone else who took the test when we did, and asking them to sign as well?" Harry wondered.

“Yes, I’ve already exchanged owls with Professor McGonagall, and she’s agreed to let me come in to Hogwarts tomorrow to use the library to research precedent for my, for our complaint.” Harry could tell how happy she was to have had someone join her cause. “I’m also going to use the Hogwarts owls to send letters to people who might be interested in signing. Of course, I’m afraid that the only people I’m going to get are those who have already failed the test and have nothing to lose. People who passed may not want to risk taking it again. Still, I’m hoping for the best.”

Harry hesitated, then decided to say what was on his mind, what seemed obvious. “That’s a good idea, but you know, Hermione, you know what some people are going to say... not that I would, of course... but—”

“Yes, I know. They’re going to say that Hermione Granger, Little Miss Has To Get the Best Score on Everything, couldn’t stand the tiniest blemish on her school record, and had to resort to any devious means to get the score she wanted, even though most everyone would be delighted with her results, it wasn’t enough for her. You know what, Harry? I don’t care! I’m right. This complaint is perfectly legitimate. The test wasn’t fair. And it’s not just ego—when you look for jobs, people are pretty impressed with ten Outstanding O.W.L.s, but they’re less impressed with nine Outstandings and one Exceeds Expectations. What if I’m competing for a job with someone who had perfect scores?”

Hermione continued for a few more minutes, explaining the possible consequences in great detail, and commenting a few more times about the unfairness of the situation. She’s really got a thing about this, Harry thought. She’s even more worked up about this than she was about the house-elves. Finally she finished.

“I’m sorry, Harry, I know you don’t care so much about this, it’s just that it’s so unfair, and I haven’t had anyone to talk to about it, well, maybe my parents, but they don’t understand exactly, they weren’t there. Thanks a lot for listening.”

“It’s no problem, really. If I wasn’t talking to you, I’d just be up in my room, killing time. I just hope everything works out okay.”

“I hope so too,” she agreed. “Can I ask you about something else? I wanted—”

“Are you still on that telephone?” Aunt Petunia was back in the room, looking at Harry angrily. “I’ve been waiting for two calls! I should have known you wouldn’t have the common decency to—”

“All right, all right, just a minute,” Harry said sullenly. He seriously doubted that she was waiting for any calls, but was surprised that he’d even been allowed to stay on this long. He said to Hermione, “I’m sorry, Hermione, but—”

“I know, I could hear her clearly at my end. That’s not very nice. You know, I could send an owl to Professors Moody or Lupin.”

“No, not for this. I’ll let them know if I want them for anything.” Petunia blanched, which had been Harry’s intention. If she wasn’t going to be nice, then he didn’t have to be nice. “Thanks for calling, Hermione. See you soon, I hope.” She said good-bye and they hung up.

Harry glanced at Petunia as if to ask her if she had more to say. He could tell she was furious at his implied threat, but she refused to look at him. She walked out of the room without a word.

The phone did not ring again all evening.

Harry was lying on his bed later that evening, a few hours after dinner, relaxing and thinking about the call with Hermione. It had been really good to talk to her; it made him remember all the more how much he missed the wizarding world when he wasn’t there. Just a year and a day, he thought. In a year and a day I’ll be seventeen and considered an adult in the wizarding world, and I can leave this place and never return. He knew, however, that living at the Dursleys’, and at Hogwarts, ensured his safety, and he wondered how would he stay safe after that. He knew he was good at Defense Against the Dark Arts, but not nearly as good as

Voldemort's Death Eaters, never mind Voldemort himself. Would the ability to Apparate keep him safe? He wished, for perhaps the hundredth time this summer, that Sirius were still around. He resolved to talk to Professors Lupin and Dumbledore about it.

Hedwig fluttered in through the window, carrying a package. Harry took it, thanked her, and opened it up. There was a book-shaped package and a card. He opened the card first, and recognized Hermione's handwriting.

"Happy Birthday, Harry! I know this might get to you the night before, and it's up to you whether you want to open it now or tomorrow. Partly I wanted to free up Hedwig in case she had other deliveries for you, and also to give you some new reading material. I really enjoyed the phone call. Thanks so much for your support. Love, Hermione."

Harry opened the package immediately. It was indeed a book. It was large, black, and very professional-looking. The plain cover read: "A Comprehensive Guide to Strategies for Teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts." Harry was puzzled; this was the kind of book used by Hogwarts teachers. It also looked like it had to have been fairly expensive. Why would Hermione send him a book like this? He opened it and another, smaller card fell out.

"I know you're probably wondering why I'd send you this book. After all, you did very well teaching us last year without it." Harry had to smile; she was right about his wondering, but wrong about the reason. "But I'm really hoping we can do the D.A. again this year, or something like it. I know, we should have a proper Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher this year, but the D.A. gives lots of chances for practice and study that we wouldn't get in class, and also flexibility—we can study what we want. If we do it again, the book could come in very handy. I hope you'll think about it, and think of the book as my way of saying thanks for all you did for us last year."

Harry hadn't given much thought to whether the D.A. would continue in their sixth year. He had assumed there wouldn't be that much of a need for it, but

what if Professor Dumbledore again couldn't find anyone willing to take the job, and had to give it to some incompetent? Harry realized that he might be able to make good use of the book after all.

He spent the next two hours looking through it, both reading and skimming. Now that he had some experience teaching, he could appreciate the value of the ideas in the book. He couldn't help thinking that if he'd had the book last year with the D.A., he could've done a really good job. He finally put it down, having already planned the better part of six lessons for the D.A., if it was to be revived.

His thoughts drifted to how pleased Sirius had been about the D.A., and then to the books he'd borrowed from the library. He got one of them out and started reading. He read about ten pages before he fell asleep.

The next thing Harry knew, it was daylight and a small, brown owl was hopping up and down on him, hooting with pleasure and jostling the package attached to its leg. Harry knew it had to be from Ron, as Pigwidgeon was Ron's owl. It was a small package, and after Harry untied it from Pig's leg and thanked him, the owl flew up to get a drink and a snack from Hedwig's cage, as Hedwig eyed him warily.

Harry opened the package to find a blue, rubbery... thing, he couldn't even vaguely tell what it was supposed to be, or do. He looked at the note that had been attached.

"Harry—in case you don't know what this is, it's an Omni-view. It goes with omnioculars, the ones we got at the Quidditch World Cup. You fold it in a certain way around the omnioculars—there's directions on the other side of this note—and when you look into the omnioculars, you see images that have been magically put into the Omni-view. This one is titled, 'Ten Years of Quidditch Highlights,' and it has the most exciting events in recent Quidditch. There are some goalkeeping moves I want to try out with you this year. Happy Birthday!—Ron."

Harry dug out his omnioculars from his trunk and tried to follow the directions to wrap the Omni-view around the omnioculars, but it was not easy. Fifteen minutes later, he was beginning to think it required more dexterity than it was worth, but he finally got it on. He looked into the viewer and saw a menu, and basic instructions on how to get to each year and event by using the omnioculars' controls. He had just watched a few seconds of action when he heard more wings fluttering.

Through the window flew two brown owls Harry had never seen before, carrying between them a medium-sized white box. Quickly untying the burden from the owls, Harry opened the box to find a delicious-looking pumpkin cake on which was written in white frosting: Happy Birthday, the Weasleys. He knew it had to be from Mrs. Weasley, and he appreciated her thoughtfulness. She knew he wasn't fed so well at the Dursleys', and while this summer had been better than most, a cake like this was quite a luxury. Harry broke off a piece and started in. I won't have to go down and try to scrounge some breakfast now, he thought.

Halfway through the piece of cake, Harry's attention went back to the Omni-view. As he was thinking about picking it up, another owl came through the window, bearing just a letter. Harry glanced up at Hedwig's cage; including Hedwig, there would soon be five owls there if one of the recent arrivals did not leave soon, and Harry wondered how Hedwig would react to this mass intrusion.

The letter was from Hagrid, wishing Harry a happy birthday and suggesting that Harry should drop by Hagrid's place as soon as possible. Harry was very confused; how was he going to get the chance to see Hagrid anytime soon? Did Hagrid mean soon after he got back to Hogwarts? He always visited Hagrid as soon as he could, Hagrid knew that.

Harry hardly had time to puzzle over this further, as within seconds of one another, two more owls came zooming in. One carried a letter, the other, a small box. No sooner had Harry untied the owls' burdens than Hedwig, apparently having had enough, started screeching very loudly and flying around the room. This

caused all the other owls to take flight, and for a second, seven owls were flying inside Harry's room. Just at that moment, alerted by the screeching, Petunia came rushing into the room.

“WHAT IS GOING ON IN HERE??” Petunia screamed. “Get those... things out of here this instant! Do you think this is a farm?”

As Petunia continued her rant, the owls made their way to the window one by one, and finally only Hedwig remained. Petunia was saying, “We've been very, very tolerant of you this summer, and you decide to have an owl party in here? This is totally unacceptable behavior, and it will not be tolerated! Our patience with you is over! You will stay in this room for the next two weeks, coming out only to use the bathroom, and your window will be nailed shut when your uncle gets home! That's it! That's enough!” With that, she left the room, slamming the door after her.

There had not been any chance for Harry to explain, or say anything, but he reflected that it was just as well. Petunia would no doubt have not been interested in hearing anything he had to say, and talking back would just have made her madder. He was actually not that bothered; the Dursleys' home felt like a prison to him even when he had freedom of movement, so being confined to his room just made it a smaller prison. He wondered why Petunia had lost her temper so badly; he thought maybe she'd been looking for an excuse to scream at him ever since that day at the train station. She hated to be told what to do by anyone, much less a group of what she considered freaks.

Harry turned his attention to the two latest arrivals. First the box, which contained a pair of what Harry recognized to be Extendable Ears, an invention of Fred and George's, which allowed the user to listen in on nearby conversations. Included were three earpieces and a note: “Dear Harry, Please use them well. You probably won't care to listen in on the Muggles, but you never know. We're sure you can figure out why we sent extra earpieces. If you can, come by the shop before the term starts—Fred and George.”

Of course, Harry knew the reason for the extras; so Ron and Hermione could listen as well, since the three of them were so often together. “Not going to be seeing you anytime soon, anyway,” he said to himself. He wondered if the Ears would come in handy much at Hogwarts. They certainly wouldn’t here, not unless he wanted to listen to Uncle Vernon boast about his latest business triumphs or complain about the rising number of immigrants.

The newest letter was very short; it said simply, “Harry—be ready to leave at 1:00. Not your trunk or your things, just you. See you soon. Remus.” Harry excitedly looked at his clock; the time was 12:15. What was going to happen when Lupin showed up and Petunia refused to let him leave? Would she dare? And why was Lupin picking Harry up? Where were they going? Harry ran through a dozen possible scenarios, but none made sense. The only times anyone had come to see him at Privet Drive had been when they came to take him away for the summer, but that was clearly not going to happen today. Well, Harry thought, at least he wouldn’t have to wait long to find out.

At 12:30, the phone rang. Harry grabbed the Extendable Ears and slipped them under the door, in the direction of the stairs. He put in the earpiece just as Petunia was answering the phone.

“Hello? No, he isn’t. No, I don’t know when he’ll be back. Goodbye.”

It was easy for Harry to tell from her abrupt manner that the call had been for him. He cursed silently; he very much wanted to talk to whoever it was, even if he had to leave in less than half an hour.

The minutes ticked away slowly as Harry occupied himself with looking at his presents some more and having another piece of cake. Finally, it was 1:00, and right on time, the doorbell rang. Harry already had the Extendable Ears deployed; he could hear clearly but see nothing.

Petunia answered the door. “Hello, can I help you?” she asked politely.

“Yes, thank you, my name is Remus Lupin. I need to talk to Harry Potter, please.”

“I’m sorry, but Harry’s not home right now.” Petunia’s voice was still polite, so Harry guessed that Lupin must have been dressed as a Muggle; Petunia probably didn’t recognize him from King’s Cross, and still didn’t know who she was dealing with. Harry was prepared to yell out the window if he had to, but he wanted to know what would happen first. He continued to listen.

“I’m sorry, but I happen to know that he is home. He’s in his bedroom. I need to talk to him, please.” Lupin kept his pleasant tone, but Petunia was quickly losing hers.

“I don’t care to be contradicted by strangers who show up at my front door. Now, please go.” From Petunia’s tone and Remus’s specific knowledge of where he was, Harry gathered that Petunia now understood that she was talking to a wizard.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Dursley, but not without Harry.”

“The fact is, he’s not going anywhere. He is confined to his room, and he will not leave for two weeks. You can come back then.”

“This can’t wait, Mrs. Dursley. For what reason is he confined?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I came up to his room and there were a dozen... owls flying around screeching their heads off. I won’t have that in this house.”

“Ah, yes. Are you aware, Mrs. Dursley, that today is Harry’s birthday?”

“What of it?” Petunia shot back. “Do you think we’re not going to punish him for misbehavior just because it’s his birthday?”

“No, but there was no misbehavior. You see, because it was his birthday, he received many owls from friends with birthday wishes and gifts. People being creatures of habit, they tend to send their owls in the morning, so if you receive a lot of mail, chances are it will come at the same time, leading to there being a number of owls in the same place at the same time. Now, owls are very territorial, and they will tolerate only so many intruders before they shriek, make a racket, and try to make the others go away.”

“I’m sure this is fascinating, but if I want information about the territoriality of owls, I’ll turn on the BBC and watch a nature show.”

“My point is,” Lupin continued patiently, “that Harry was not responsible for what happened, and there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. Understanding this will, I imagine, cause you to choose to rescind your punishment.”

“You imagine wrong. He should not be receiving post from owls at all. If they want to keep him out of trouble, his friends can send him things by normal post. Now, please leave before I call the police.”

“You can do that, Mrs. Dursley, but we have Memory Charms for a reason. Now, I am asking politely and for the last time. Please call Harry to the door.”

“For the last time? And what do you plan to do? You can’t hurt me, I know, there are rules about that sort of thing.”

“Yes, indeed, I cannot hurt you, or use magic on you, nor do I have any intention of doing so. There are things I can do, however, that are within the rules.”

A second later, Harry heard a strangled cry from Petunia, followed by her screaming, “Potter! Get down here, this instant!”

Harry quickly gathered up the Extendable Ears, threw them in the trunk (having already stowed his birthday items) and locked it, and ran down the stairs, double-checking for his wand in his back pocket. He saw a shaking Petunia and a pleasant-looking Remus Lupin, so Muggle-like in a business suit that Harry would have had a hard time recognizing him. But what got his attention the same instant was the lawn, which could be seen through the open front door.

The lawn was red, but changing color before Harry’s eyes. It was orange, then yellow, then green, then blue... Harry realized it was cycling through the colors of the rainbow. He couldn’t help but smile as he realized that Lupin, who must have known how inordinately proud the Dursleys were of their immaculately kept lawn, had chosen a harmless yet exquisitely painful way to remind Petunia that

cooperation was her best course. Harry also knew that she would be terrified that the neighbors would see, and ask awkward questions.

“All right, here he is, now stop it!” yelled Petunia; Harry blinked, and the lawn was its normal hue of green again, as if nothing had happened.

Remus looked at Petunia seriously but politely. “Mrs. Dursley, I feel I need to emphasize, if I haven’t already, that what we said at the train station was not a joke. If you don’t like Harry, if you don’t want to treat him as you would a family member, we can’t stop you. But you will not treat him badly on purpose, and you will not punish him for things he can’t control. Most of us fight against anti-Muggle prejudice, but we don’t respond well to anti-wizard prejudice, either. If you don’t like wizards, don’t take it out on Harry. He can’t help what he is. Finally, please take this seriously. It was fortunate for you that it was I, and not Mad-Eye,” and Harry could tell from Petunia’s expression that she knew who he meant, “who came here to get Harry. I don’t know what he would have done, but I’m sure it would have been less... subtle. Good day, Mrs. Dursley. Please come with me, Harry.”

As they walked away, Harry didn’t know quite what to say; he kept looking up at Lupin and looking back over his shoulder at the lawn. Finally, he said, “I’m sorry you had to deal with that. I should have just run downstairs when I heard it was you.”

Lupin answered, “No, it’s better that you didn’t, you’d just have been in more trouble when you got back.” He paused. “I had some idea of what your home life was like, but experiencing it is different. I understand why you’re so keen to get out of there every summer. You have quite a cross to bear.”

“You have one too,” Harry replied, referring to the fact that Lupin involuntarily became a werewolf on the night of the full moon every month. “At least I get to leave mine behind when I reach seventeen. You’re stuck with yours.”

“True. We all have them to some extent or another. So, I gather you welcome the opportunity to get out for part of a day?”

“You bet,” Harry said, grinning. He also thought, but did not say, that he was very happy to see Lupin in particular, who had always been very kind to him. “But why did you come? What’s going on? I have a feeling you’re not just taking me out to the carnival for the day.”

Lupin smiled. “No, but that sounds like fun. We should do that sometime. But you’re right, this has to do with Hogwarts. That’s where we’re going.”

“Really?” Harry asked. He had never been to Hogwarts in the summer; the idea seemed strange. “How? Why?”

“Two very reasonable questions. To answer the first, we’ll be taking a Portkey. As for the second, there are things that Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall want to talk to you about. I know your next question will be ‘what things are those?’ but you’ll have to wait to talk to them to find out. I’ll just say that it’s nothing bad, you’re not in any trouble.”

“How did you know that I was thinking that?”

Lupin smiled again. “I believe that any youngster, no matter how well-behaved, being taken to see an authority figure will at least entertain the notion that he or she may be in trouble. We start thinking of things we might have done. You may be able to imagine how it was for me as a child; I was not always completely aware of what I had done, so I could entertain any fear, no matter how outlandish. Ah, here we are.”

Harry looked up—he had not been paying much attention to where they were going—and saw the familiar home of Arabella Figg. As they walked up the path to the door, cats scattered, except for one who followed them and meowed as if in welcome.

Mrs. Figg was waiting at the door. “Why, hello, Remus, good to see you again. And you, Harry.” They said hello, and walked in; Harry started looking around to see if he could tell what the Portkey would be. “Would you like a nice cup of tea before you’re off?”

“Thank you, Arabella, but no, they’re expecting Harry any time now. We really should be going.”

“All right, then,” she said agreeably. “Have a lovely time.”

Lupin walked over to the coffee table in the living room. As Harry followed, Lupin gestured to a half-scale wooden sculpture of a cat. “Ready?” he asked. Harry nodded. Lupin took Harry’s hand to make sure they touched it at the same time, and they did.

CHAPTER 2

A SUMMER'S DAY AT HOGWARTS

After a few disorienting seconds, they were in Professor Dumbledore's office, standing across from his desk. Dumbledore was standing near the door to his office, seeing someone off. "Thank you, Sybil. Have a pleasant day," he said. He closed the door. He looked at Harry and Lupin. "I'm very sorry, my meeting with Professor Trelawney seems to have run long. Please allow me to store some thoughts, and I'll be with you in a moment."

Harry watched as Dumbledore opened a drawer in his desk. Harry could not see from the other side of the desk what was in it, but that immediately became clear. Dumbledore raised his wand to his temple, appeared to extract some silvery threads, and transferred them into the Pensieve that Harry knew was in the drawer. Dumbledore closed the drawer and looked up. "Harry, Remus, good to see you both. Remus, thank you for getting Harry. I hope there was no trouble."

"A little," Lupin answered, and Harry got the feeling from Lupin's expression that he would rather not have had to embarrass Petunia in order to secure Harry's release. "It's been quite a while since I've met any Muggles who are that antagonistic towards wizards. I rather admire that Harry manages not to blow up a family member every summer."

Harry made a noise that was between a grunt and a chuckle. "It's not easy sometimes. If I could be charged for all the magic I've thought of doing to them, I'd be doing life in Azkaban. But it hasn't been so bad this summer, thanks to you," he said, addressing Lupin.

To Dumbledore's slightly raised eyebrows, Lupin briefly summarized the meeting he and the others had had with the Dursleys a month ago. "Well,

diplomacy has never been Alastor's strong suit," commented Dumbledore, in what he clearly knew to be humorous understatement. I'm glad it's not, Harry thought. Nothing but fear would have made them lay off me this summer.

"Well, I'll leave you two to talk, then," Lupin said. After Dumbledore thanked him again, Lupin headed for the door. When he got there, he stopped, turned, and looked at Harry. "You know, Harry, you should feel free to send me an owl if you have any questions about anything, or just want to talk, especially in the summer. Just so you know." Harry just nodded; Lupin turned and left.

"A very good man, Remus," Dumbledore mused. "A pity he couldn't have remained Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. He would have filled the bill very nicely."

"That's for sure," Harry agreed. He felt a small burst of anger at Professor Snape, whose disclosure of the information that Lupin was a werewolf forced Lupin to resign his position at the end of Harry's third year at Hogwarts. "He was the only one in my time here who knew what he was doing." Then it suddenly dawned on Harry that his comment could be taken as a criticism of Dumbledore, who hired all but one of those teachers. "Sir, I didn't mean—"

Dumbledore chuckled lightly. "That's quite all right, Harry. Actually, Barty Crouch knew what he was doing, much to my regret. But I take your point. Actually, I'm optimistic that the situation might improve this year."

Harry's eyes widened slightly. "You mean you've found someone good who's willing to take the job?"

"The former, yes; the latter, that has yet to be determined. Tell me, Harry, have you heard any rumors to the effect that there is a jinx on that position?" Harry nodded. "Do you believe that is true?"

Harry thought for a few seconds, and answered, "It's true that bad stuff has happened to the teacher of that course all five years I've been here. But I really don't believe in jinxes, at least the non-magical kind. So I'd have to say no. Also, I've

been involved in some way with what happened to each of those teachers. So, who knows, maybe the jinx will end when I graduate from Hogwarts.”

“Well, I do not think that will be necessary, but I am glad you do not take it seriously. Now, Harry, the reason I wanted to talk to you today—”

“Professor? I’m sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to say something first.” Dumbledore nodded attentively. “I wanted to say that I’m sorry—” Dumbledore shook his head slightly, but allowed Harry to continue—”about how I acted in here last month. I just couldn’t control myself.”

“I don’t think anyone in your position could have, Harry,” said Dumbledore gently. “It was simply too much to process. It takes time. But the last thing in the world you need to do is apologize. Remember, I made you stay in the room. You wanted to go, but I wouldn’t let you out. It was partly because I needed to tell you about the prophecy, but partly because you needed to let go of some of your immediate pain and grief. I did feel responsible for what happened, so it seemed only right that I should absorb the initial burst. You have nothing to apologize for. If it is because I am the headmaster and you are a student, well, at that point I felt that we were just two people.”

Harry nodded, feeling grateful for Dumbledore’s forgiveness. “Maybe it’s partly that, but it’s also that... well, I have a lot of respect for you, and...” He trailed off, but he could see his meaning was clear to Dumbledore.

“I understand, Harry, and I appreciate that. But context matters in everything, not least of all here. I might react differently if you lost your temper with me for no good reason, out of contempt or indifference. But frankly, I would have been more worried about you if you had managed to keep your temper in that situation. As I said, it was just too much, and I know that your regard for me did not enter into it. But we are all human, and thank goodness for that. We cannot truly grieve for those who we did not love.”

“By that reckoning, Voldemort isn’t that much human, is he?” Harry observed.

Dumbledore considered this. “From this viewpoint, I suppose not. I am sure that he is no longer capable of feelings such as love, or even affection. People to him are tools to be used, instruments of control and power. Whether they are his enemies or his devoted followers, he judges them by how well he can make use of them. No more, no less.”

Harry frowned in puzzlement. “But how did he get like that? Was he just born that way? Why would anyone want to be that way?”

“Your last question is the easiest to answer, so I will take that one first. He rejects love, affection and friendship because he considers them weaknesses. If you love someone, they can hurt you, with words, rejection, or their illness or death. It is a vulnerability.” Seeing Harry raise his eyebrows, Dumbledore continued, “Strictly speaking, this is true. Consider your case and you may see what I mean. Last year, you and one of the Weasley twins attacked Draco Malfoy after a Quidditch match. What was it he said that prompted you to attack him?”

“He was saying foul, horrible things about the Weasleys, especially Mrs. Weasley,” Harry answered, the memory stirring up feelings of anger.

“He wanted you to attack him,” Dumbledore observed. “He knew that with Dolores Umbridge having the power to mete out punishments, you would be sure to be penalized very disproportionately. He could not defeat you on the Quidditch pitch, so he wanted to hurt you in some other way, and he succeeded. One of your vulnerabilities, in his eyes, was your deep affection for the Weasley family. Now, bear in mind, I do not consider this a true vulnerability; the rewards we gain from such bonds far outweigh the disadvantages. I meant only that it is so for one such as Voldemort, for whom power is the only thing that matters.”

“You said ‘one of your vulnerabilities,’” Harry pointed out. “What were the others?”

“I was thinking of only one other, and that is your failure to recognize that such words from him or anyone mean nothing. If what he says matters to you, he

has power over you. That is why he does it. You know what he says is not true. You must simply ignore it. That will take away his power.”

“How can I just stand there and let him say terrible things about Mrs. Weasley?” Harry demanded. She especially had been so good to him, he couldn’t imagine how he could listen to such things about her and say nothing.

“By reminding yourself that they are only words and mean nothing. We give credence to the words of others based on our respect for them, their knowledge, and their character. If you know someone is simply attempting to goad you, you can safely discount anything they say. If you wish, you may take satisfaction in knowing that by failing to respond as they wish, you are frustrating their efforts.”

Harry pondered this. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. It’s really hard, though. I have gotten to where him insulting just me doesn’t bother me... I should talk to Ron about this; he’s always losing it with Malfoy. Hermione, on the other hand, seems to know this already. She never gives him the satisfaction of knowing if he’s got to her. Maybe I can ask her how she does it, give me some advice.”

Dumbledore nodded. “An excellent idea, and one of the many benefits of close associations; we can help each other in areas in which we need it. But to get back to your question about how Voldemort became as he is today, that is a psychological and perhaps metaphysical question. Environment and early experiences undoubtedly have some influence—as Tom Riddle, he was abandoned by his father and raised in a Muggle orphanage—but many people, including yourself, rose from trying circumstances and became fine people. I cannot say when he gave up on the idea of love and friendship. When people are psychologically wounded, they may cling to hope or give in to despair. No one can know what causes one or the other, the human mind being as complex and mysterious as it is. All we can know about Voldemort is that he is the combination of a crippled psyche and tremendous magical power. It is not at all difficult to feel sorry for him.”

Harry was stunned. “Feel sorry for him? Look at all the people he’s killed, tortured, maimed, you name it!”

“Yes, and that is exactly why I feel sorry for him,” Dumbledore explained. “One of the great but not well understood truths of life is that what we do to another, we do to ourselves. Voldemort has done all this to himself as well, but he cannot feel it because he has rid himself of that which made him human. That is why I feel sorry for him. By that I mean that I pity him, not that I sympathize with him. I sympathize with his victims and their loved ones. I pity him. It is as if he has been taken over by evil, and the human personality which once resided within him is gone. That is a great loss.”

It was a hard thing for Harry to understand. Voldemort had killed his parents, along with many others, and caused untold suffering. Harry couldn't easily accept the idea that Voldemort could be thought of with the kind of thoughtfulness and empathy that Dumbledore was showing.

Harry suddenly realized that they were talking about Voldemort in a way that Dumbledore never would have the previous year, when he avoided Harry in an effort to protect him from Voldemort intruding into Harry's mind. “Professor, I just thought of something... last year, you were so worried about Voldemort possessing me that you wouldn't even look at me. Now, you don't seem to be worried. What's changed?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Actually, that was one of the things I wished to talk to you about. There is still a concern, and it is still highly advisable for you to learn Occlumency. However—” Dumbledore paused, seeing a look of alarm on Harry's face, and knowing what it meant—“Professor Snape will not be the one instructing you.”

The relief crossing Harry's features was equally palpable. Harry wanted to thank Dumbledore profusely, but stopped himself, knowing that Dumbledore would not approve of the implied criticism of Snape. Instead, he asked, “Who will be teaching me, then?”

“I will,” Dumbledore said simply.

Even if he had wanted to, Harry could not have stopped the look of surprise and elation on his face. “Really? That’s great! But... isn’t this what you were worried about last year? That Voldemort would see me as an opportunity to get to you?”

“The situation is now different. Voldemort knew he would have only one opportunity to use the connection between you and he to deceive you into thinking that what you saw was real. He has used it; he will not try to do so again. It is still possible that he could try to possess you to try to reach me, but I have realized that that possibility must be confronted head-on, not avoided. It is not practical that I avoid being in your presence indefinitely. Instead, I will teach you Occlumency, and I will give you advice to help you fight him off should he attempt to enter your mind.”

“How can I do that?” Harry asked. “How can I possibly get him out of there once he’s in there? I’m not strong enough to do that.”

Dumbledore smiled. “In fact, you are, Harry. You simply have to do deliberately what you did last month. When he possessed you briefly in the Ministry of Magic, what did you feel?”

Harry shuddered. “It was horrible. I felt surrounded, isolated, like I was in the grip of evil... which I suppose I was, come to think of it. Even worse than when a dementor is close by. I thought I would just as soon die than have that continue.”

“But then you had a different thought. What was it?”

Harry looked at Dumbledore in surprise. How could he possibly know that? He preferred not to say, but sensed that it was important, and understood that he could trust Dumbledore. He slowly said, “I thought, at least I would be with Sirius again.”

“And you experienced a strong feeling of affection for him, is that right?”

Harry nodded. “You see, Harry, that is it right there. The love you felt for Sirius was what drove Voldemort away. He could not, he cannot, deal with it. He cannot share his thoughts with someone who loves, who feels love in his presence. It is anathema

to him. Your next question may be ‘why,’ I would like you to see if you can work that out.”

Harry thought for a minute; recalling what Dumbledore had said earlier, and said uncertainly, “Because love weakens him?” still not understanding quite why.

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, Harry. Even more than that, it practically debilitates him. As I said before, all he knows is evil and power. He finds it easy to forget that such a thing as love exists. Experiencing love is a direct reminder of what he has become. It stirs the long-forgotten remnants of his conscience, his humanity. This he cannot allow. If he did, his entire existence as he knows it now would be called into question.”

“You mean, he could die?” Harry was amazed at the thought.

“No one can say what would happen, because he would never permit it. He may well think twice about trying to enter your mind again, because of what happened. But if he should try, you have the means to drive him out.”

Still not quite understanding what he was being asked to do, he said, “You mean, I should think about love?”

“No, Harry,” Dumbledore answered seriously. “You should feel love. There are similarities to how you summon a Patronus. When you summon a Patronus, you think of a happy memory so that you will feel happy; it drives away dementors because they are the living antithesis of happiness. In this case, you think of something that causes you to feel love, as Voldemort is the living antithesis of love. The more powerful feeling of love you can summon, the more effective it will be.”

How am I supposed to do that? wondered Harry. Love was a concept that he had never discussed. He knew that some people said ‘I love you’ to each other, but it had never been said to him. It all seemed so unfamiliar. Feeling foolish for having to ask, but knowing it was important, Harry asked, “Umm... how do I know if I love something or just like it a lot? What’s the difference?”

Dumbledore looked with great sympathy across his desk at the boy who had never known a parent’s love. “It may be best not to focus overmuch on the word

love,” he advised. “It is merely a placeholder for a feeling, the most powerful feeling known to man. Focus on that which warms your heart, people who care for and value you, feelings of friendship and closeness.”

That made things somewhat clearer to Harry; he felt he could do that. He nodded slowly and said, “I understand.”

“Good,” said Dumbledore. “We will be talking about this more in the future, as it is not unrelated to Occlumency.”

“What?” Harry blurted out. “Professor Snape certainly never said anything about love when he was teaching me Occlumency. He just said to clear my mind.”

“Yes, and the mental skills used to focus on a specific thought or feeling are similar to those used to clear one’s mind. You will see this as we proceed.”

Harry nodded, feeling happy that at least he wouldn’t be dreading Occlumency lessons as he had before. “So, we will be starting when the term starts?”

“No, I thought we would begin next week, if you do not have any other pressing engagements. Next Monday, perhaps?”

“Next Monday?” Harry gaped. He did not necessarily object, but it seemed strange to think of coming to Hogwarts regularly in the summer. “Well.... sure... of course I don’t have any plans, I’m just kind of surprised. But yes, that’s fine.”

“Excellent,” Dumbledore said. “I will see you next Monday at 1:00 p.m.; you should come the same way you did today. Now, there is something else I wished to discuss with you. It concerns Dumbledore’s Army.” He smiled, and Harry saw that familiar twinkle in his eyes. “The name does have a certain ring to it, doesn’t it?”

Harry grinned, happy to see Dumbledore joking about it, considering all the trouble it ended up causing the previous year. “The name was Ginny’s idea, actually,” he said, wanting to give credit where it was due.

“Indeed? I shall have to mention that to her the next time I see her. The name was fortuitous, as it allowed me to take responsibility when Cornelius

discovered it. It would have been very bad indeed if you had been expelled. In any case, I would like you to tell me about it.”

Harry spent the next few minutes telling Dumbledore the story of how the group came to be, and about the lessons. “I didn’t really feel like I was teaching so much as leading a practice group,” Harry concluded. “I was worried about doing it at first, but now I’m really glad I did. It helped keep me going through the bad times last year, especially after I got thrown off the Quidditch team. The others were pretty enthusiastic about it, too. I was really pleased with how everyone improved. Everyone tried really hard.”

“Indeed, it does seem that you have much to be proud of. It takes courage to be the focal point of such an enterprise, though of course you have shown no shortage of that in your time here.” Harry glanced down, embarrassed. “Now, I believe you have not yet received your O.W.L. results; Professor McGonagall has them and will be discussing them with you later, after we are finished here. But I will mention one of them here, now. I imagine that you would not be surprised to learn that you achieved an Outstanding score in your Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L.”

Harry had hoped for, and privately expected, such a score, but had been reluctant to say it or think about it much, lest he be disappointed. “Yeah, I guess I’m not too surprised. I knew I did well. But I’m still really glad to hear it.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, I have been told by Mr. Tofty, who conducted your exam, that he has rarely, if ever, seen such a proficient performance. Now, normally we do not discuss exam results with anyone other than the student involved, but I am making an exception in this case. Would it surprise you to learn, Harry, that all of the fifth years in Dumbledore’s Army scored Outstanding O.W.L.s in this subject?”

Harry’s mouth dropped open, indicating the depth of his surprise. “Really? All of them? Wow... that’s great! Well, like I said, everyone was really keen. It’s easier

to do well when it's something you really want to do. It's probably why I do so badly in Potions.”

“No doubt you are correct when you point out that those studying with you were highly motivated, but I very much doubt that your fellow students would have done so uniformly well unless you had some skill as a teacher. You may take my word for it; I daresay I have some experience in the matter, being as I am a school headmaster.”

“I guess I shouldn't argue with you, then,” Harry reluctantly allowed. “Does this mean you want the D.A. to be a regular thing? Because it seemed to me that we wouldn't need it if we had a proper Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, would we? I mean, we only started the D.A. because Umbridge just wasn't teaching us at all.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry, a serious expression on his face. “You have a good point, Harry, and it is my hope that we will have, as you say, a proper Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher this year. I know I am asking a lot, but I would like you to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor.”

Harry gazed at Dumbledore in a kind of fog. Surely he could not have heard what he thought he heard. How could he be a teacher when he was still a student? It was inconceivable. He shook his head.

“I'm sorry, Professor, I must have heard you wrong. I thought you said—”

“You were correct, Harry,” Dumbledore said patiently. “I would like you to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

“Me? Be a teacher?” Harry was flabbergasted. “I'm just a student. Who would listen to me?”

“Why, those who wish to get an Outstanding score on their O.W.L., for a start,” said Dumbledore with amusement. “Everyone found out about the D.A. when Dolores Umbridge discovered what you were doing last year and stopped it; so they know that you have been a teacher, even though in an unofficial capacity. I know for a fact that those in the group have been telling their friends and families

what a positive experience it was for them. When people find out about the group's O.W.L. scores, and they will, it will seem perfectly natural for you to be teaching the class. Results matter. Now, will there be people who will not welcome this?

Undoubtedly, some will say that no student, no matter how good a teacher, should teach while a student; some will say that I resorted to you because I could find no one better due to the so-called jinx, and some will say that you were offered the job because you are the famous Harry Potter. Such will always be the case; as I told Hagrid once, not a week has gone by in my time as headmaster that I have not been criticized for how I run the school. But the fact is, you are right for this position. I would not be making this request if that were not the case, believe me."

Harry was still stunned, but was also starting to feel trapped; he didn't think he could say no to Dumbledore, even for something like this. "I don't know... it's all so much..."

"I can understand why you might be intimidated by the idea," Dumbledore admitted. "It is true that this would be a Hogwarts first, but that does not mean that it is not a good idea. Perhaps you are not quite aware of how your lessons affected the others. I recently received a letter from Neville Longbottom's grandmother. I have her permission to show it to you; I would like you to read it."

Harry uncertainly took the letter Dumbledore handed him, and began reading silently:

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I wished to write to make you aware of the great change Neville has undergone this past year; you may not have noticed, having to flee the school as you did. He is virtually a different boy; more active, confident, and outgoing than he has ever been before. He has told me repeatedly, with great enthusiasm, about what a positive experience studying in

Harry Potter's group was. I do not know if that is the sole reason for his change, but I know it must be at least a large part of it. He insisted on accompanying Harry and his friends on their mission to the Department of Mysteries, which I'm certain he would never have done before. Although it was a great risk, I am proud that he had the courage and determination to do such a thing. I certainly hope that you will encourage the continuation of the group next year, now that you are back and hopefully free of Ministry interference. Also, I know you will be needing a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher next year. You could do much worse than to give Harry the job; in fact, you have done so in the recent past. I spent much of last year persuading those I know that you are not as feeble and addle-brained as the Daily Prophet has suggested. Please do not make a liar of me.

Sincerely,
Esmerelda Longbottom

Harry still felt stunned. He knew Neville's grandmother to be an intimidating woman, not easily impressed.

Dumbledore appeared to have been thinking along the same lines. "Have you met Mrs. Longbottom, Harry?"

"Yes, last Christmas, at St. Mungo's. When we went to see Mr. Weasley, she and Neville were visiting Neville's parents."

"Ah, yes. Well, you know then that she is a woman to be taken seriously. And she was not the only one to express such a view. Now, I understand the idea may be rather startling to you, but you taught a class of twenty-five students last

year, and very successfully. Being the official teacher is not that different, except that your age makes it unprecedented.”

Harry grinned nervously. “Isn’t that like saying that Everest isn’t that hard to climb, except that it’s 29,000 feet high?”

Dumbledore chuckled gently. “It is not quite the same thing, but I take your point. I gather that because of your age, you are worried about being taken seriously by the students in your classes?” Harry nodded. “Well,” Dumbledore continued, “you may wish to consider that in this situation, being ‘the famous Harry Potter’ is helpful. Like it or not, Harry, you are an icon, a symbol of defiance of Voldemort. People who might dismiss you because of your age will accept you because of that, as well as your reputation as leader of the D.A.”

“Not the Slytherins,” Harry said darkly. “They’ll be competing with each other to see who can disrupt my classes the best. Malfoy’ll have them in open rebellion. There’s no way they’ll accept me.”

“They are students at this school, and they will behave properly in their classes or face the consequences,” Dumbledore said firmly. “While teaching, you will have all the authority of any Hogwarts teacher, with the power to take points from offenders’ Houses and give detentions. I know that you will not abuse this power; if anything, I am concerned that you may be too slow to use it. You must be tolerant to a point, but not tolerate deliberate disrespect. I believe you will be able to draw the line at an appropriate place.”

Harry fervently hoped that Dumbledore was right; he supposed that even Slytherins didn’t want to do detentions any more than they had to. Still, there was Malfoy...

“What about Malfoy, Professor? I’ll have to give him detentions every class, because he’ll never stop challenging me. He hates me so bad that he won’t care. Of course, I’d rather not teach him anyway; he’s just going to run off and join the Death Eaters after he graduates.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “Who can say, Harry? You may be right, but he may surprise us. One never knows what the future will bring, and we should always hold out hope for positive outcomes. In any case, you will be spared that particular problem. You will not be teaching the N.E.W.T. classes, for sixth and seventh years; it would not be fair to you to ask you to teach classes you have never taken yourself. If you agree to accept the position, you will teach first through fifth years. I will assume the responsibility of teaching the N.E.W.T. classes, which you will be taking as well.”

Harry stared at Dumbledore. He was going to have the chance to study advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts from the world’s greatest living wizard? Harry felt ecstatic, then had a sudden realization—he would have this great opportunity only if he accepted the teaching position. If he refused, Dumbledore would be forced to hire an adult, who would teach all Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, including N.E.W.T. classes. Suddenly, teaching looked a lot more appealing.

“Wow...” Harry was speechless for a few moments. “Of course, it’d be terrific to study with you... but how will I have time for everything? A full study schedule is hard enough, but with teaching...” Harry couldn’t imagine how he could do it.

“Yes, we will have to make certain allowances, and I do not promise that it will be easy,” Dumbledore admitted. “But, as you know, all Hogwarts students of third year and above are required to take a minimum of eight classes; you will be allowed to take as few as five. You will be allowed to drop History of Magic and Divination, and to choose between Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures. If you still wish to possibly become an Auror in the future, you will want to continue with Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Potions, and Transfigurations. In whatever case, you can work out your schedule with Professor McGonagall after we have finished up here. Even with three fewer classes than last year, it will not be easy, but it should be manageable.”

Harry welcomed the idea of taking fewer classes, but he thought he saw a problem with this arrangement. “What if I’m teaching a class at the same time as I’m supposed to be in another one?”

“Yes, that is a potential problem,” Dumbledore agreed, “and it is one reason that I am asking you well in advance of the school year. If you agree to teach the class, the schedule must be arranged so as to avoid this. It can be done, of course.” He paused, regarded Harry, and asked, “Are there any more objections you can think of?”

Sure that Dumbledore was teasing him, Harry decided to joke back: “Give me a minute, I’m thinking.”

With a smile in his eyes, Dumbledore made an ‘as you like’ gesture, and waited. Harry finally said, “I can’t think of any now... probably I’ll think of a dozen tonight, but then it’ll be too late.”

“May I take that as an acceptance of the position? You need not give me an answer right this minute, you know. If you would like a few days to mull it over, you may certainly have them.”

“No, thanks, I’d rather just say yes now and get it over with,” Harry said with a mix of determination and resignation. “I know I’ll end up saying yes in the end, and if I take more time to think, I’ll just worry myself into a state, thinking of all kinds of arguments and problems. By saying yes now, I’ll skip all that, and get straight into worrying about the actual teaching.” Harry looked up at Dumbledore. “Okay, yes, I’ll do it.”

“Excellent, Harry.” Dumbledore looked pleased, but in a way that made Harry suspect that Dumbledore had never had a moment’s doubt about Harry’s eventual response. “I deeply appreciate your willingness to do this. I know our students will benefit greatly.”

“Well, here’s one way to look at it,” Harry said, half to himself, “I can’t hardly be any worse than Lockhart or Umbridge. That’s some consolation... Hermione will go crazy, she’ll be so pleased, she got me that book, after all...”

Something clicked in Harry's mind, and his eyes narrowed. "Professor, you said that you got more than one letter suggesting that I be made Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. One of those wouldn't be from Hermione, would it?"

In a very amused tone, Dumbledore said, "I'm sorry, but I am not at liberty to divulge the contents or sources of much of my private communications."

"I knew it," Harry exclaimed. He felt exasperated and proud at the same time.

"I should emphasize, Harry, that I had the idea to do this before it was recommended to me by anyone. If you would like someone to blame, you need look no further."

Somewhat abashed, Harry said, "No, I don't really want to blame anyone, I just kind of wished she'd have run it by me first. Of course, I'd have told her that she was off her nut."

"I should think so. You were looking at me in much the same way a short time ago," Dumbledore observed. "Of course, I am long since used to it, what with the business with the Daily Prophet last year."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that; can you imagine what they'll do with this? 'The Boy Who Lived to teach his fellow students at Hogwarts.'" Harry shook his head. "They'll make me look like a tragic hero or an arrogant upstart, and I'm not sure which is worse."

"I assume they will choose whichever characterization fits best with the thrust of the article," Dumbledore mused. "You do, however, have experience with this as well; I trust you will not be bothered by it."

"Usually I just don't read the paper, that does it okay. Funny how the fact that I'm used to being famous is a help here."

"It seems fair that it should help now and then, as it is quite a burden most of the time," Dumbledore agreed. "Now, let's take you down to Professor McGonagall's office."

They left Dumbledore's office, passing the stone gargoyles to which one wanting to enter the office had to give the correct password. Harry absently wondered what this year's password would be; his experience was that it was always a sweet or confection of some sort. He then realized that as a teacher, he would be told the password as a matter of course. He wondered what other aspects of life at Hogwarts would be different because of his new position.

Lost in his musings, he happened to glance up to see that they were just about to enter Professor McGonagall's office. As they walked in, McGonagall stood, and looked at Dumbledore expectantly. He smiled and said, "Minerva, may I present to you our new Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor." Harry glanced around the office, looking embarrassed.

McGonagall smiled; a small one, but by her standards it was a wide grin. "Welcome to the staff, Professor Potter."

Harry nearly flinched. "Are people really going to call me that?" he asked plaintively. "I don't know if I can get used to that."

"Well, if that's the worst thing to happen to you, you can be very grateful," advised McGonagall. "I daresay, however, that you will manage to get used to it."

"Indeed," agreed Dumbledore. "I seem to recall that it took me some time as well. I'll leave you two to it; I must be off on some errands. Minerva, I trust you will take him to my office when he is ready to go home?"

"Of course, Professor," she said, and he departed. To Harry, she said, "Please sit down." Harry did so.

"First, Harry, I would like to express my condolences for your loss, for Sirius's death. I know what he meant to you. And... well, you have had more than enough loss for one lifetime. I fervently hope that you will have no more."

She was looking at him with great sympathy. Since McGonagall was usually quite stern, Harry did not know whether to be more surprised by this or by her calling him by his given name, which she had never done before. He felt very affected by her concern; he had always liked her, even though she was strict.

“Thank you, Professor. I appreciate it,” Harry said sincerely.

She nodded. Not wanting to linger on the subject, she asked, “So, how do you feel about becoming a teacher?”

“Right this minute, a bit terrified,” Harry answered honestly. “Part of me is wondering how I managed to get myself into it.”

“If I had to guess, I would say that you found it particularly difficult to say ‘no’ to Professor Dumbledore,” she said with understated amusement. “You would not be the first to whom this has happened. Teaching will be unfamiliar at first, but after a while you will be fine, I’m sure.”

Harry nodded, not saying anything. He very much hoped she was right, but he still felt overwhelmed by the whole experience.

“Now, I would like to discuss your O.W.L. results with you, in terms of how they will affect your schedule. First of all, here are the results themselves.” She handed him a piece of paper.

Harry read it quickly, scanning the important parts. His scores were: Astronomy: fail; Care of Magical Creatures: Exceeds Expectations; Charms: Outstanding; Defense Against the Dark Arts: Outstanding; Divination: fail; Herbology: Acceptable; History of Magic: fail; Potions: Exceeds Expectations; Transfigurations: Exceeds Expectations.

He didn’t quite know what to feel; some scores were better than he’d expected, others, worse. He was surprised to see three ‘fails’, though he realized they were understandable: he’d never taken Divination seriously, and had expected to fail after taking the exam; he felt History of Magic was borderline, but he missed the last ten minutes of the exam due to the pain and panic of the false vision that eventually led him to the Department of Mysteries; and as for Astronomy, he felt reasonably sure he would have passed had he not lost the time everyone else did due to the commotion that took place that night and was the source of Hermione’s complaints that the exam results were not fair. Even so, he was not happy with three ‘fails.’

The most shockingly positive result was the Exceeds Expectations score in Potions. Immediately after the exam, Harry felt he might have squeaked by with an ‘Acceptable,’ but was amazed to learn he had done even better. My potion must have ended up all right, he thought.

His other results were as expected or better; he hadn’t expected an ‘Outstanding’ in Charms or an ‘Exceeds Expectations’ in Care of Magical Creatures or Transfigurations. On the whole, he was satisfied. He consoled himself with the thought that of his three ‘fails,’ none were in subjects that would affect his desired field. The Astronomy ‘fail’ bothered him a little, he realized; he should have passed, he felt, and while he didn’t feel passionately about it as Hermione did, he could understand why it was so important to her.

He looked up and saw Professor McGonagall looking at him as if trying to discern his reaction to his results by his facial expressions. “It’s kind of a mixed bag, isn’t it?” she commented.

“Well, I suppose I could have done better in a few things, but overall it’s not that far from what I thought would happen.” He remembered Hermione’s nascent crusade, and thought he would help her out if he could. “The Astronomy ‘fail,’ though... I really think I should have passed, but with what they did to you and tried to do to Hagrid, it was impossible to concentrate--”

“Yes, I understand, you needn’t elaborate further,” McGonagall interrupted him. “Believe me, I have already heard plenty on the subject from Miss Granger.”

“And?” Harry prompted her. He was curious to know where she stood on the subject.

McGonagall sighed. “Objectively, I would say I lean a small bit in Miss Granger’s direction. On the one hand, O.W.L.s are so important that a student should make every effort to ignore any distractions, even such as the events of that evening. The fact that Hagrid is your friend about whom you were greatly concerned should not affect the disposition--”

“We were concerned about you, too, Professor,” Harry blurted out before he had a chance to think better of it; he knew that McGonagall had a particular aversion to being interrupted. “We thought they might have killed you.”

McGonagall looked slightly annoyed and embarrassed at the same time. “Thank you, Harry,” she said kindly. “Fortunately, the people at St. Mungo’s know what they are doing. To continue, as I said, one can say that those taking the test should never allow themselves to be distracted. On the other hand, Miss Granger is quite correct when she points out that it is up to the testers to provide a distraction-free environment. In addition, then-Headmistress Umbridge,” she continued, saying Umbridge’s name with obvious distaste, “can certainly be held accountable, as she provoked the confrontation which caused the distraction, with disregard for the fact that testing was taking place nearby. So, I would say that Miss Granger has a fairly good case.”

“It wasn’t only us who were distracted,” Harry pointed out. “Even Professor Tofty, after you were attacked, said something like, ‘Really! Not even a warning! Outrageous behavior!’ So, if even the professor was distracted...”

“Yes, that is also a very good point, one that Miss Granger did not fail to mention in her owl to me on the subject,” McGonagall agreed. “However, in the end, this will not be for me, or anyone at Hogwarts, to decide. The O.W.L. board will make the final decision.

“Now, let us move on. I would like to discuss your schedule for this year. I assume that Professor Dumbledore has informed you that you may take fewer classes so that you will have time to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts?”

Harry nodded. “So, I guess I have to decide which classes I’m going to take.” He paused. “Professor, what am I going to do about Potions? You said last year that I need a N.E.W.T. in them to become an Auror, but you also said that Professor Snape won’t teach the N.E.W.T. class to anyone who got less than ‘Outstanding’ on the O.W.L., so I don’t see how I can take the class. Isn’t it kind of

unfair to make it that hard to get in? I mean, even you only require ‘Exceeds Expectations’ to get into your N.E.W.T. classes.”

McGonagall gave Harry a slightly sour look, annoyed that Harry seemed to be asking her to criticize a fellow professor. “My opinion of Professor Snape’s standards is really not relevant. He is a professor and can set the standards he chooses.”

“Yes, but couldn’t you talk to him? Ask him to…” Harry trailed off, knowing that what he was about to suggest was useless; Snape hated Harry so much that Snape was bound to laugh in McGonagall’s face if she asked such a thing, and McGonagall’s expression confirmed it for Harry. “I’m sorry, Professor, but this is very important to me; I’d really like to become an Auror. You did say to Umbridge—”

“I was wondering whether you would bring that up,” McGonagall said resignedly. “Yes, I did say to then-Headmistress Umbridge that I would stop at nothing to see that you got the chance to become an Auror. I admit, and you probably already know, that I said it in anger, not necessarily expecting that I would have to follow through on it. Still,” she said as Harry held his breath, “one must keep one’s word, and I intend to do so here. I will ask Professor Snape to accept you into his class, and if he refuses, I will teach you Potions myself.”

Harry was amazed that she would go that far. “Thank you, Professor, thank you very much. It means a lot to me.”

She nodded briskly. “Now, as for the rest of your schedule. You will be taking Potions, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, and Transfigurations. The other two choices are Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures. Which would you like to take?”

Harry considered. “Well, I really would hate to stop having classes with Hagrid.”

McGonagall replied, “Yes, but you must consider the effect on your future career, not your friendship with a teacher. I’m sure Hagrid will understand if you choose not to take his class.”

Harry was not at all sure of that, considering how emotional Hagrid could be at times, but decided not to argue the point. “Well, which class is more useful for becoming an Auror? It seems like neither one is that related.”

“Yes, that’s true,” she agreed. “That is why I am giving you the choice, and why your class load is being reduced to five. But if you want my opinion, I would—by a very small margin—recommend Care of Magical Creatures. It would be easier to study Herbology outside the school in the future, if you wanted a thorough grounding, than Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid is quite resourceful in acquiring creatures.”

“Yeah, I expect that it won’t be long before we have a class on dragons, with a couple tied up just out of reach of his house,” Harry joked.

McGonagall looked at him sternly. “I would reprimand you for that kind of comment, if I did not know that you mean it affectionately.” Suddenly her frown vanished, and her tone became a confidential one. “To be honest, I’ve wondered the same thing for some time now. I only hope it happens after I’m retired.”

Harry grinned, wondering whether she would have shared that with him if he were not now a fellow teacher. “Probably most students would say it would be cool, but now that I’ve had first-hand experience, I know better.” He would not soon forget his encounter with the Hungarian Horntail in the Triwizard Tournament.

“Yes, I would imagine,” she agreed. “Now, then, there is one more matter to discuss. I want you to know,” she said, looking at him seriously, “that before the last school year, I recommended to Professor Dumbledore that you be made the Gryffindor house prefect. Despite your, ahem, checkered history with school rules, I felt your leadership qualities made you suitable for the position. In retrospect, it is clear from your experience with the D.A. that my judgment was not mistaken.” She

gave him another small smile. Embarrassed again, Harry nodded. “Professor Dumbledore,” she continued, “did not disagree with my judgment, but he felt that your, shall we say, unique status would make fulfilling your prefect duties more onerous. He asked me to submit another recommendation, so I chose Mr. Weasley. Mind you, I am not in any way dissatisfied with the job he has done.”

“I am glad you chose him, I really am,” Harry assured her. “It meant more to him, especially his family, than it would have to me, but it’s very nice to know you would have chosen me, if I didn’t have this... Professor, what exactly did you mean by my ‘unique status?’ Did you mean being famous, or the treatment I was getting in the Daily Prophet, or this connection I have to Voldemort?”

“The third,” McGonagall answered. “Professor Dumbledore foresaw that your connection to Voldemort could complicate your life, and he felt you did not need another complication, honor though it may be.”

“He was right,” Harry said. “This past year was hard enough; being a prefect would have made things harder. Was that what you wanted to tell me?”

“No, I was just getting to that. This year, as Angelina Johnson has graduated, the Gryffindor Quidditch team needs a new captain. You are currently the senior team member, the one with the most experience. Not incidentally, you are an outstanding player; Oliver Wood tells me that he is sure that you could play professionally in the future if that were your goal. For those reasons, you would be a logical choice for team captain. However—”

“I’m going to be a teacher this year, and I’ll be lucky to find the time just for Quidditch practice, never mind being captain,” Harry finished her thought.

She gazed at him sternly. “Yes, that’s right, but I will thank you not to interrupt me. I do not take kindly to it.”

Harry looked repentant. “Sorry. The thing is, I’m not sure I’d make a great team captain anyway. You see, they have to know about strategy and tactics, and make game plans for the whole team. Wood was always doing that. But I’m a

Seeker, and Seekers don't have to coordinate with the other team members that much. I think Ron would make a much better captain."

"Yes, I had a feeling you were going to suggest Mr. Weasley," said McGonagall.

"Well, he is the best person for it," Harry said defensively. "He's followed Quidditch all his life, he's a big fan, so he knows strategy backwards and forwards. Also, he comes from a family of good Quidditch players, so he's got more experience than he's had just being on the team. I really think he'd be good."

McGonagall regarded him evenly, giving no indication of how she saw matters. "Very well, I will take your advice under consideration. I just did not want to deprive you of such a well-deserved opportunity without your consent."

"Thank you, Professor, I appreciate it."

"Well, it appears then that we are done here. Unless there is anything else you would like to discuss?"

"No, thanks, Professor," Harry said after thinking a moment. "I guess I'll go home and start trying to figure out how to be a teacher."

"You will be fine, Harry, trust me," McGonagall assured him. "Professor Dumbledore once told me that a famous Muggle said, 'We have nothing to fear but fear itself.' Or, as a wizard put it, 'You can't escape a dragon if you're so scared that you can't run.' It comes out the same either way. If you get your anxiety under control, you will have done the hard part."

Harry knew from his Triwizard experience that it was true, but he still wasn't sure exactly how he was going to do it. "So, are we going back to Professor Dumbledore's office?"

"Not just yet; there is someone else here who wants a word with you. Would you come with me, please?"

Harry nodded and followed her. He wondered who else wanted to see him, but since she didn't tell him, he figured she wouldn't even if he asked. As they

walked through the corridors and passageways, Harry thought about how different things looked when the school was so empty in the summer.

“Professor,” he asked, “I was wondering, what does Peeves do in the summer? I mean, there’s nobody here to bother, is there? It would be boring for him to stay here.”

McGonagall chuckled. “You know, I’m not sure. I’m not here much in the summer myself, so I wouldn’t know. Perhaps he goes into Hogsmeade to bother the residents there.”

“But why is he even here at all?” Harry asked. “I mean, I don’t care, but just out of curiosity... he does nothing but cause trouble. Couldn’t Professor Dumbledore get rid of him if he wanted to?”

“Mr. Filch has asked the same question countless times, in rather more colorful language,” McGonagall said. “Of course Professor Dumbledore could keep Peeves out, but he refuses to do so. He has said that Peeves ‘keeps people on their toes,’ I believe was the phrase he used, and another time he mentioned not wanting things to get boring. He feels that Peeves adds character to the school.” She paused. “I have not always seen eye to eye with Professor Dumbledore on this matter, but I must admit, Peeves earned his keep last year. That was a reminder to me not to question Professor Dumbledore’s judgment.”

Harry grinned. Peeves had mercilessly harassed Dolores Umbridge after Dumbledore fled Hogwarts last year, acts approved of by all who supported Dumbledore.

McGonagall and Harry entered a room which Harry, who again had not been paying great attention to where he was being taken, realized was the library. He looked across the room and saw a lone figure, sitting at a large table with three books spread out in front of her. Based on that, Harry would have known who it was even if he couldn’t have seen her face.

“Miss Granger,” McGonagall said, startling Hermione. “I believe you wanted to see Professor Potter when I was finished talking to him?”

Hermione's eyes went as wide as Harry had ever seen them. She just stared for a few seconds, then she let out a loud shriek and raced for Harry. Harry was getting used to being hugged by Hermione, so he wasn't bothered at all, even though she was more excited for him than he was for himself. She plowed into him and held him tightly, saying, "Oh, Harry, that's so wonderful..."

Harry smiled and hugged Hermione back, and glanced up to see Professor McGonagall with a very amused look on her face. Hoping they would know he was joking, he said, "Um, isn't there some Hogwarts rule about teachers hugging students?"

Hermione chuckled but didn't let go. McGonagall said, "Yes, it is assumed that the teacher in question will use his experience and maturity to determine whether or not it is appropriate. I feel you will somehow manage. When you are finished, come see me and I will take you to Professor Dumbledore's office." She departed.

Hermione took a half-step back, still holding Harry's shoulders. "It's so good to see you, Harry! It's great that we both happened to be here on the same day. And, my goodness, you're a professor! Isn't it amazing? Aren't you excited?" She finally let go of him, looking at him expectantly.

"Well, if by 'excited' you mean 'overwhelmed' or 'terrified,' then yes, I'm pretty excited," Harry replied. "Hermione, how can I be ready for this? I don't know if I can do it."

"Of course you can," Hermione said, trying not to be impatient with Harry's nervousness. "You taught twenty-five of us. How can this be any different?"

"Because we all wanted to be there. We were all motivated," Harry pointed out. "I'm going to be teaching a bunch of people—"

"This isn't like Divination or History of Magic, where people don't care," Hermione interrupted him with surprising vehemence. "Defense Against the Dark Arts may be the most practical and important subject in the whole school. I

promise you, nobody is going to come to class not caring whether they learn anything or not. They'll want to learn, and they'll pay attention to what you say. You don't have to give lectures if you don't want to; in fact, it may be better if you don't. If you want to, just do what you did with us last year. That worked pretty well."

"Yes, it did, I have to admit," Harry agreed. "Did you hear that all the fifth years in the D.A. got Outstanding on their O.W.L.s?"

"No, Professor McGonagall didn't tell me that, but I'm not surprised. We all were doing pretty well. I assume Professor Dumbledore told you that to explain why he asked you to take the job?"

"Yes, he did. He also said that a few people sent him owls suggesting that I be made a teacher." Feigning suspicion, he added, "I think I know who one of those people might have been."

"I was right, wasn't I?" Hermione answered, playing along and pretending she was wounded by Harry's accusation. "I was sure you'd make a good teacher, and Dumbledore agrees with me, so I'd say I'm vindicated. Just because you don't recognize it yet doesn't mean it's not true."

"Well, you keep on saying that, and maybe one of these days I'll believe it's true," Harry said resignedly. "You could be right, for all I know. It's just so new, and such a shock—I had never even thought about the idea—that it's very hard not to be intimidated by it right now. Maybe, hopefully, I'll get used to it by the time the term starts."

They sat down at the table Hermione had been working at when Harry and Professor McGonagall had come in. "You will, Harry, I'm sure you will," she said.

Harry appreciated her efforts to make him feel better. "Thanks," he said seriously. He looked at her for a moment and said, "See, now, if it was you, I could understand that. You're as close to a perfect student as there is. You could be a teacher, for sure."

Hermione smiled wistfully and shook her head. "No, Harry, I couldn't, certainly not now. There's a reason Dumbledore chose you and not me. Sure, I

know lots of stuff, but knowing and learning aren't the same as teaching. I'd be impatient with the students because they don't study as much as I do. A teacher has to inspire the students to want to learn. You do that without even knowing you do. I know, I was in the D.A., I saw. People wanted to learn from you, they had confidence in you. Even Zacharias Smith, at the end."

Harry raised his eyebrows; if that was true, he hadn't known it. He mused that he was lucky to have Hermione as a friend; she was trying so hard to help him. It was really nice that she happened to be there...

"Hermione, I just thought of something. Why are you here? I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm really happy to see you, but it's not like you're here studying every day of the summer," he said, gesturing to the books on the desk. He paused. "Are you?"

She chuckled. "No, I'm not. I'm not even studying now. Professor McGonagall gave me special permission to come in and use the library today because I wanted to do research for my petition to the O.W.L. board. Didn't I tell you that on the phone yesterday? I could have sworn I did."

"Oh, that's right," he said. "Sorry, I'm a bit distracted, to say the least. How's it going? Found anything?"

"A few things so far, but they're contradictory. There are a few cases of people getting a chance to take the test again, but under more dire circumstances, like the students being attacked by wild creatures, things like that. Nothing I've found yet has spoken to our specific case. I talked to Professor McGonagall about it, and she thinks it'll come down to the board members using their judgment. But there is one thing I'm concerned about..." She trailed off.

Harry just nodded, gesturing for her to continue.

"The thing is," she went on, "that one possible outcome of this is that the entire exam is ruled invalid. I mean, what I'm hoping for is that just those who want to can take the test again, but it could end up that everyone has to take it again, whether they want to or not, whether they passed or not. If that happens..."

Harry nodded and finished her sentence. "...you're not going to be very popular."

"That's putting it mildly," she agreed. "It'll be a lot more like it was for you in our second year, when everyone thought you were the Heir of Slytherin. Except I'll be hated, not feared."

Harry nodded sympathetically. "Hard to say which is worse."

"Hated," she said immediately. "If you're feared, at least people will leave you alone because they're scared. I'm really getting nervous about doing this, Harry. I mean, this could affect people's lives. People could lose their O.W.L.s because of me. You could, for all I know."

He shook his head. "Nope. Failed Astronomy," he said simply.

"Oh, that's a relief," she said quickly, then suddenly covered her mouth, mortified at what she'd said. "Harry, I didn't mean—"

Harry laughed, causing her to halt her apology in mid-sentence. He said, "Don't worry, I knew what you meant. Really, I'm not that bothered either way. In a way, I kind of hope more people failed, so your idea becomes more popular."

"I hate to say it, but yes, that would help me," she agreed. "But for now, all I can do is wait for the school year to start, and see what people think. But I have to ask myself, it is right for me to even risk that? Can I justify doing this just so I can have my unblemished row of Outstandings? Would people be right to hate me if I did?"

Harry found it hard to answer that question, since he was more focused on what would make Hermione happy than abstract questions of right and wrong. He simply said, "Well, you should just try not to worry about it until the school year starts. Focus on other things, and this may work itself out."

"Maybe you're right," Hermione said. Then she smiled and said, "Of course, I could say the exact same thing to you, for your situation."

Harry smiled back as he realized the truth of what she said. "Yeah, but that would be really sneaky of you. I guess it's harder to take advice than to give it." He

paused. “By the way, thanks for the birthday present. It’s really nice, not to mention really useful.”

“Honestly, I didn’t really expect that Dumbledore would make you a teacher,” Hermione said. “I hoped, but I thought the book would be useful for the D.A., if nothing else. In a way, it’s too bad that there’ll be no more D.A.—I liked that it was only people who really wanted to be there.”

Hermione paused, then suddenly looking nervous and tentative, she said, “Harry, there was something I was going to ask you about on the phone yesterday, but it’s probably better to do it here anyway. I was wondering... how you were doing. I mean...”

She seemed to be trying to find a way of asking without saying the necessary words, but he understood her meaning. “About Sirius, you mean,” he said quietly.

She nodded, looking apologetic. “I’ve never lost anyone I’ve been that close to, but I think I can imagine how hard it’s been for you. I almost don’t want to ask, because bringing it up will just remind you of it, but I really want to know how you’re doing with it. I’ve been really concerned about you.”

Harry sat in silence for a moment. In a way he didn’t want to talk about it, for the reason she had just mentioned, but in a way he did, because he hadn’t talked about it at all since it happened. Also, Harry couldn’t imagine who he could talk about this with if not Hermione. He couldn’t brush her off with a ‘fine, thanks’ as he could with most people. “Some days are better than others,” he said. “But in general, it gets a little less bad with time. I really miss him, though.”

“I know,” she said with a very sympathetic expression. “I wish there was something more I could do.”

Harry suddenly remembered how he’d felt upon seeing Hermione struck down by the Death Eater in the Department of Mysteries. “There is,” he said. “Stay alive.”

She looked at him quizzically.

“When you got hit, in the Department of Mysteries, Neville and I were checking for a pulse, and all I could think was, don’t be dead, it’s my fault if she’s dead. I just couldn’t bear to think of it. And then it happened, with Sirius. I don’t know if I could stand to have it happen again. I feel like I’d just lose it.”

“Did you feel like it was your fault with Sirius?” she asked.

“Yeah, I did,” Harry said, emotion rising. “If I hadn’t been fooled—”

“That’s part of life, Harry,” she said intensely, as if by the power of her conviction she could make him see things differently. “No one is perfect, and we can’t be expected to be. What if I had died? It wouldn’t have been your fault, just the fault of whoever killed me. I chose to go with you; I would have been furious if you’d tried to stop me. I was responsible, not you. When Sirius heard that you were in danger in the Department of Mysteries, if someone had suggested to him that he stay behind for his own safety, what do you think he would have said? He would have told them to go fly a kite! He was going to protect you, and that was that. You know that.”

“Yes, he died protecting me! My parents already did that. How many more people, people I care about, are going to have to die protecting me?”

“However many it is, they’ll risk it because they choose to, Harry,” she said firmly. “And because they care about you, it’s not right to deny them that. Not the dying, of course, but the taking risks to protect you. After all, you’re like that, too! In the first year, you and Ron saved me from that troll. You didn’t even know me, except that I was a bossy teacher’s pet. You did it anyway! Why? Because you thought it was the right thing to do. You’d do it again in a second. I don’t have to ask, I know. What if I were in danger and I told you not to come help me because then you’d be in danger too? You’d come anyway! You couldn’t stand not to. You wouldn’t worry that you might get killed and I’d feel guilty.

“I’ve thought about this a lot lately, Harry, because I thought you might feel this way. I think that the fact that we risk our lives for each other, not just you and I but people in general, is one of our noblest qualities. When we do, we make a

statement about the other person and about ourselves. Because it's risky sometimes it goes bad, but that's the chance we take. And when it does go bad, we feel sad that we lost a friend, but we should honor their life and their sacrifice, not beat ourselves up over what they did. Sirius wouldn't want you to blame yourself for what happened. You know that."

Try as he might, Harry couldn't deny the truth in some of her words. "Part of me knows that, but..." He thought for a few seconds, then looked at her, still pained. "I know I can try to do that, and I think I will eventually, but the problem is... when I blame myself for what happened, there's at least some truth in it. You said it's part of life, and you may be right, but it's still my fault. It's more my fault than you know, in fact..." He trailed off and saw that she was waiting for him to finish the sentence, but being patient, knowing it was hard for him.

"When I was having those dreams, I wanted them to continue," he admitted. "I knew Professor Dumbledore wanted me to learn Occlumency so I wouldn't have them, but I wanted to keep having them anyway, I wanted to know what was behind the door I kept seeing, it was like I needed to know. I imagine that's part of what Voldemort had in mind. But the point is, I knew what I was supposed to do, and I didn't even try to do it, I did the opposite. No reason, just that it was what I wanted to do, so I did it. And look what happened."

She looked at him very sadly. "That still doesn't make it your fault," she said. "You had no way of knowing the dreams were deliberate, nobody warned you about it. They, Dumbledore, gave you way too little information. He told you what to do, but not why to do it, which is also important. If he had—"

He shot her an angry look. "I'm not going to blame him. It wasn't his fault."

"I'm not saying it was, Harry, really," she said, still sad in the face of his anger. "Just that there were all kinds of things that factored into it. You did what you thought was right with the information you had, and it's really understandable that you'd want to know what was behind the door. You can't blame yourself."

Harry's anger had faded, replaced by guilt and sadness. He suddenly felt as though he needed to get off his chest what had preoccupied him for the past month, alone on his bed on Privet Drive. "Yes, I can... I have, a lot. I've thought about this so much, trying to think of what I should have done differently. I feel like what it all comes down to is that I just acted on whatever I felt, didn't think first. Not only when I got the vision of Sirius being tortured, but other things... attacking Malfoy after the Quidditch match, talking back to Umbridge when I would have been better off keeping my mouth shut... not to mention yelling at you and Ron so much." He looked up at her with a very small smile, wanting to apologize without actually saying the words.

She nodded her appreciation. "It wasn't that bad."

Harry wondered whether she meant it, or was just trying to be nice. "Anyway, I just can't be doing that anymore. What if I lose my temper, do something stupid, and you die, or Ron, or Ginny... I just can't let that happen." He looked at her with a very serious expression, unconsciously conveying how much he worried about it. "I need to control myself, I need to think before I do things. I need to grow up, basically. I'm sixteen, I'll be an adult in a year. I need to act like one, not like a spoiled kid who throws a fit every time something doesn't go his way."

"That's not how you've been acting," she said forcefully. "You've had so much stress in your life, it's really understandable that you might react to things like you have recently. I'm sure most people wouldn't have done as well as you've done with what life's thrown at you."

He thought for a few seconds. "Who knows, maybe you're right. But all I know is, I can't afford to do that anymore. I mean... what if next year, I'm sitting with Ron or Ginny, saying, if only I'd kept my head, Hermione would still be here... I need to do better."

Again, she looked at him with great sympathy. "You will, Harry, I'm sure. Don't worry, nothing's going to happen to me. I know it almost did last month, but

I really think that's not going to happen again. Don't ask me why, I just don't think it will."

"I really hope you're right," he said after another pause. "And thanks... I appreciate your talking to me about it. I feel a bit better. Which is strange, because I'm not sure I feel less bad about how I acted, or less responsible for Sirius... I don't know exactly what it is I feel better about."

She nodded. "I know what you mean. It helps just to talk, Harry, if something's really bothering you. Even if nothing can really be done or changed immediately, it feels better to have talked about it. You've never been the kind of person to do that all that much, a lot of times you've just kept things bottled up. But talking is better. And if you can get things out of your system, you might find it easier to stay in control like you want to, not lose your temper so much."

"I wouldn't know," he admitted. "But maybe you would, so I should listen. Talking about that kind of thing isn't exactly what I'd think of doing. But I'll try." He paused. "I kind of wish I could have had this conversation with you before we went home from Hogwarts. It would have helped over the past month."

She shook her head. "It was way too soon. The wound was so fresh, you were in such pain, you couldn't have separated your emotions from the situation, even for a short time. But that's natural. I mean, if you were killed saving me, do you think I'd be able to not blame myself, even though I know rationally that it really wasn't my fault? No way. I'd cry and wail and beat on things and curse myself for ever having been born so you wouldn't have had to die saving me. It would all be irrational and I would know it but I would feel it anyway. It's part of being human."

"When you say that," Harry said, "the first thing I think is that I wouldn't want you to wish you had never been born, and then I realize that the fact that it's the first thing I think just proves your point. It emphasizes that you're right, that Sirius wouldn't have wanted me to beat myself up all summer. He would have

wanted me to remember him fondly and have as happy a life as I could. It's just kind of hard."

She nodded, then after a moment, said, "By the way, are you hungry at all? I've been here for a few hours now, and I could use some food."

"Yeah, it's been a while for me, too, sounds good. I haven't had anything since my birthday cake this morning. Mrs. Weasley sent it to me," he explained. He knew that Hermione knew that the Dursleys were highly unlikely to even recognize his birthday, much less do anything nice for him.

"That was very nice of her," Hermione said as they got up and started walking.

"It sure was," Harry agreed. "Also, it was pumpkin, so it's kind of more substantial, which is important when I'm at the Dursleys'." The topic of his food situation while living with the Dursleys took them into the kitchens, where they started looking around for house-elves to help them. They did not have to look for long.

"Harry Potter!" a voice shouted, and it was obvious to Harry who it was. Dobby ran up to him and hugged him around the waist. "Dobby is so happy to see Harry Potter! Harry Potter is great and brave, and will make an excellent teacher!"

Harry looked down at Dobby, startled. "How in the world did you know that? I only found out a little while ago!"

Dobby smiled. "House-elves is hearing many things, Harry Potter. Professors is talking where house-elves can hear, and they doesn't care, for they knows that house-elves is keeping their secrets." His smile grew even wider. "But this is not a secret, for of course Harry Potter knows about it. Hogwarts is very lucky to have Harry Potter."

Though he was used to hearing Dobby talk about him in the most outlandishly superlative terms, Harry still blushed. Hermione said, "Yes, that's true, Dobby, it really is," still trying to bolster Harry's confidence.

“Miss Hermione Granger, who is trying to free all the house-elves as Harry Potter has freed Dobby,” Dobby said suddenly, favoring Hermione with a fervently admiring look. “Dobby is sad that house-elves does not appreciate Hermione Granger’s help. They does not deserve such a kind and generous champion. How could Hermione Granger be anything else, though, being such a great friend of Harry Potter’s? Hermione Granger is not only very clever—Dobby has overheard many teachers say so—but also virtuous and wise and compassionate.”

Now it was Hermione’s turn to blush. Harry smiled mischievously, enjoying her embarrassment, and said, “Yes, that’s true, Dobby, it really is,” parroting Hermione’s most recent words. She gave Harry an annoyed look and blushed even more.

Dobby beamed. “Dobby would be honored to get some food, if you is hungry.”

“Yes, that would be great, Dobby, thanks.” Harry said. Dobby sped off.

Still smiling, Harry turned to Hermione. “You know, I think Dobby forgot to mention some of your good qualities. You are all those things he said, of course, but there’s plenty more. For example—”

“Oh, shut up,” she said, trying to look stern, but unable to help smiling. “He really does go overboard, doesn’t he?”

Harry nodded. “You should have seen him that Christmas when Ron gave him the sweater his mother always makes. It was nothing to Ron, but Dobby was ready to canonize Ron on the spot.” He paused. “Of course, living with the Malfoys all those years, you might think of the smallest act of kindness as a big, big deal.”

Dobby ran back up to them. “The other house-elves is getting your food together.” After a second’s pause, he said, “Dobby has heard that Harry Potter again faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and again lived to tell of it.” He had an unmistakably awed expression.

“Yeah, well... not everyone who was there that night lived to tell of it,” Harry said somberly. “I wouldn’t have lived if Dumbledore hadn’t been there to save me.”

“Professor Dumbledore is a great wizard,” Dobby agreed, nodding. “But Harry Potter is still brave and noble. Dobby has been telling the other house-elves about Harry Potter’s bravery.”

“Why, Dobby?” Hermione asked curiously. “Are they interested?”

“No, they isn’t, not really,” Dobby admitted. “But Dobby wants to persuade the other house-elves to oppose He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Dobby is hoping Harry Potter’s bravery will inspire them.”

“Wouldn’t they oppose him anyway?” Hermione asked.

“They doesn’t like him, of course,” Dobby explained, “but they thinks it isn’t their business. They says that house-elves is only thinking of serving their masters, not getting involved in things outside their houses.”

“But if Voldemort—” Harry started, but Dobby flinched badly, as though burned. “I’m sorry, Dobby, but I’m going to say his name. Professor Dumbledore told me I should. Besides, how can we fight him if we’re not even brave enough to say his name?”

Dobby nodded, but looked miserable. “Dobby is sorry, sir. But Dobby is not nearly as brave as Harry Potter.”

“I think you will be, Dobby, when you have to be,” Harry assured him. Dobby straightened up proudly.

“Anyway,” Harry continued, “I was saying that if he were to take over, some of their families would be killed, and they would either be killed or have to live with evil masters, like you used to. Doesn’t that matter to them?”

Dobby’s head bobbed up and down. “Of course Harry Potter is right. Dobby is trying to explain this to them. But house-elves is not used to thinking about anything outside their home. Even to think about it is hard for them. Dobby

must be patient. But it may be difficult, since Dobby is wearing clothes and getting paid, they think his ideas are strange, and they don't want to listen to him."

Just then, two house-elves rushed up with plates full of food and flasks of pumpkin juice, and presented them to Harry and Hermione. They bowed, as did Dobby, who said, "Thank you for seeing Dobby, sir and ma'am! You are most kind!"

Harry and Hermione said good-bye and left the kitchens, heading for the Great Hall, where the students normally ate. "Funny," Harry commented, "how Dobby has this way of making me feel guilty when he praises and compliments me for doing something I didn't even intend to do in the first place. I mean, we went to get food, not to see Dobby, but as far as he's concerned, we honored him and paid him a huge compliment."

She nodded, and thought for a few seconds. "You know, after we graduate and you get your own place, he'd probably love to be your personal house-elf. He'd think it was the greatest job in the world."

Harry had never thought of that. He wondered if it was possible, and how he'd feel about having a house-elf.

Harry and Hermione had a long lunch, eating and talking well into the afternoon. Not only was it great for Harry to see Hermione again, but she kept trying to provide moral support to overcome his nervousness about becoming a teacher. With her help, he was starting to get used to the idea, and he was even looking forward to reading more of the book she got him for his birthday. He thought the more he read it, the more comfortable he'd be. She cautioned him that while she should take ideas from it that he liked, he shouldn't do anything from it that he was uncomfortable with. By the time they finished, he felt a lot better, and he told her so.

"Thanks, Harry," she said, obviously pleased. "I'm really glad I could help."

"Me, too," he said. "I just wish I could help you more with the O.W.L. thing."

“You’ve done what you can,” she assured him. “I’ll do a little more research today before I go home, then I’ll just have to wrestle with my conscience over the rest of the summer. Can I walk you back to Professor Dumbledore’s office?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Harry. “We just have to stop by Professor McGonagall’s office first, she’s supposed to escort me there.” They headed in that direction.

“So, you are ready to go home?” asked McGonagall when they arrived at her office.

“Yes, I am,” answered Harry, and the three of them set off to Dumbledore’s office.

She noticed that Harry seemed a bit jauntier than before. “Feeling any better?” she asked.

“Yes, thanks,” Harry replied. “Talking about it with Hermione has helped. It doesn’t seem quite so impossible now.”

As they came within sight of the gargoyles which guarded the headmaster’s office, Harry saw Dumbledore and Professor Snape leaving Dumbledore’s office and heading in their direction. This ought to be good, Harry thought wryly. At least Snape can’t be as horrible to me as he’d like, with Dumbledore and McGonagall around.

“Ah! Professor McGonagall! Harry! Hermione!” Dumbledore exclaimed in cheerful greeting. Harry made eye contact with Snape, who seemed to be trying to put up the most polite expression he could, but still looked as though he smelled something truly foul.

“Professor Dumbledore, Professor Snape,” greeted McGonagall cordially. Harry and Hermione nodded to both.

“Ah, yes, Severus, this gives me a chance to introduce to you the newest member of our faculty,” Dumbledore said.

Harry concentrated on keeping his face blank. No smiling, no nothing.

Snape looked around in obvious confusion. “Headmaster? I don’t understand. I see only the five of us.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Dumbledore agreeably. “I have prevailed upon Mr. Potter to accept the post of Hogwarts’ Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor.”

There was silence for about five seconds; it seemed that everyone was waiting for Snape’s reaction. Snape’s face was blank, as though trying to process information that would not compute. Finally, he said, “I’m sorry, Headmaster, I must not have heard you properly. Would you say that again, please?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “You know, Severus, that was exactly how Harry reacted when I asked him to take the job, almost word for word.”

Snape was so astounded he wasn’t even looking nastily at Harry. “Headmaster... surely, this is... unprecedented...” His expression left little doubt but that he thought this was a very bad idea, but with Dumbledore, he would only go so far.

Dumbledore continued smiling. “Again, exactly what Harry said earlier. Harry brought up six specific objections to my request. It is not like him to be so... disagreeable,” he said, glancing at Harry in such a way as to make sure Harry knew he wasn’t serious. “Fortunately, in the end, he reluctantly acceded to my request, for which I thank you again, Harry,” Dumbledore said, looking at Harry benignly. “I know you did not want this.”

Harry’s mind raced. Oh, I see what he’s doing, Harry thought. He’s making sure Snape knows that I didn’t want this, so Snape can’t claim later to me or anyone that I somehow connived or tricked Dumbledore into giving me a privilege I didn’t deserve. He’s making sure that he’s the target of Snape’s wrath, if there is any. Well, it is true, and better him than me—at least Snape won’t be nasty and vicious with him.

“And, wouldn’t have imagined it in a million years,” Harry affirmed vigorously and truthfully. “All I can say is, I’ll do my best.”

“And we can ask no more than that,” Dumbledore said kindly. “Well, Professor Snape and I must be moving along. Harry, Hermione, I hope you have pleasant summers indeed. Minerva, I will be seeing you later. Come along, Severus.”

Dumbledore gently guided Snape away, Snape still speechless. Harry felt that Snape was looking at Dumbledore as though he were truly concerned for Dumbledore's mental well-being.

"Well, that wasn't so bad," Hermione commented to Harry. "It was very good of Professor Dumbledore to do that, to try to direct Professor Snape's anger away from you."

"Yes, it was, but it won't work in the long run," said Harry. "No matter what Professor Dumbledore says, next time I'm alone with him or even in a class..." He trailed off, feeling the rest of the sentence was obvious.

Hermione finished it anyway. "...he'll be really nasty and make all kinds of insinuations or outright slanders, I know."

McGonagall's eyes went wide. "Miss Granger, you are talking about a Hogwarts professor! You will speak with the proper respect!"

Hermione looked at McGonagall earnestly. "Professor, I respect you, and I'll do as you ask, for your sake. But I've been in classes with Harry for five years, and I've seen him treat Harry so badly, for so long, for so little reason, that it's very hard to think of him with any respect. He takes shots at me, too, but I'm always raising my hand and drawing attention to myself. Harry never does, but Snape singles out Harry anyway. Ask any Gryffindor fifth year, they'll tell you."

Harry said nothing; he didn't know whether Hermione's outburst would do any good, but he appreciated the impulse behind it.

McGonagall stared at Hermione for a few seconds, then headed towards Dumbledore's office, her face impassive, Harry and Hermione following. Harry took this to mean that she had nothing more to say on the topic. He had never seen a student be as frank with McGonagall as Hermione had just been, and he suspected that it was only McGonagall's respect for Hermione that stopped her from admonishing Hermione further.

They entered Dumbledore's office, and McGonagall gestured toward the cat figure on Dumbledore's desk. Harry said goodbye to McGonagall and Hermione,

thanking the latter again for the book. He then grasped the Portkey to return to his other, less preferred world.

CHAPTER 3

THE WIZARD AND THE BOXER

It was by now early evening, and twilight was just beginning to settle over Little Whinging as Harry walked home from Arabella Figg's house. He wondered what reaction, if any, he would get from Aunt Petunia when he walked in the door. She was bound to still be furious over what Professor Lupin had done, Harry thought. Would she still insist on him staying in his bedroom? That wasn't going to work, not if he was going to start Occlumency lessons with Professor Dumbledore next week. He decided that he would act as if her punishment had never happened, and see whether she reacted. If she tried to keep him in his room, Harry knew she would have to worry about more than a red lawn. He was sure it wasn't worth it to her.

Harry turned the corner onto Privet Drive; the Dursleys' house was six houses away. He glanced up and saw three boys on the sidewalk about three houses down, walking in his direction. He thought nothing of it until, thinking they looked vaguely familiar, he looked up again.

He couldn't believe it. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle? On Privet Drive? What in the world are they doing here? Harry asked himself, then answered it at once: they're here to see you, obviously. He quickly calculated his options. He could probably turn around and outrun them, but they could always wait in front of his home, and he'd have to get past them sooner or later. Neither he nor they could use magic, being underage, so it had to be that Malfoy intended to give Harry two bad choices: forego the use of magic and get beaten up, or use magic to defend himself and risk expulsion, as had nearly happened last year. There had to be another option, he told himself.

But, wait, I'm always being followed, aren't I? he thought. He had no specific confirmation that this was still the case, but it seemed a reasonable assumption. If it's true, then I'll be safe, but... whoever's following me won't want it known that they're doing so, and won't want to intervene openly. How far would they let him get beaten up before intervening, if at all? Harry decided he couldn't count on help that was iffy and might not even be there in the first place. He decided to play it by ear and keep his wand handy, but only to be used as a last option.

By now, they were one house away and closing, standing between Harry and four Privet Drive. He saw Malfoy smile, and say loudly, "Well, what do you know, guys, it's Harry Potter! Isn't that something!" Crabbe and Goyle snickered as usual whenever Malfoy said something obviously intended to be funny.

Harry stopped walking about ten feet away from them, his posture signaling a readiness to use his wand. "Yeah, imagine that," he said sarcastically, "finding me walking along the street where I live. You must be so surprised."

"Is this where you live? Really? We had no idea," said Malfoy, not bothering to pretend he really meant it. "We were just looking around to see what Muggle neighborhoods look like."

"Yeah, because you're so interested in Muggles," Harry retorted. "What the hell do you want, Malfoy?"

Malfoy raised his eyebrows at Harry's language, but otherwise ignored it. "Well, since we have you here, Potter, we thought we'd have a nice chat with you," he said, not troubling himself to be subtle about his intentions.

"We'? You mean, they're actually going to speak?" taunted Harry, motioning at Crabbe and Goyle. They turned to Malfoy with questioning expressions, as if this possibility hadn't occurred to them. Malfoy rolled his eyes.

"No, didn't think so," Harry continued. "No, I always think of Crabbe and Goyle as being like those people in the Muggle TV programs who never say anything, because they'd have to pay them if they did." Seeing nothing but confused

looks, Harry remembered, “But you probably don’t know what TV is, it’s a Muggle thing. Anyway, Malfoy, I’ll be happy to have a chat. Would you like to come round the house for some tea?”

Harry fleetingly wondered what would happen if Malfoy took him up on the invitation. Aunt Petunia would throw a fit and throw them out, solving his problem, but of course he knew that wouldn’t happen.

“With Muggles?” Malfoy sneered. “No thanks, here will do quite fine.”

“Okay,” Harry answered. “So, what shall we chat about?”

“Let’s start with the slander you’ve been spreading around about our families,” Malfoy said, smiling with anticipation. “You said all of our fathers were Death Eaters in that stupid Quibbler rag. No one believes it, of course, but you still can’t say things like that. Now, you had better—”

“Oh, get off it, Malfoy,” Harry interrupted him. “It’s only us here, no one to impress or fool. We all know your fathers are Death Eaters, there’s no point in even arguing it. The Prophet re-printed the article, so now people do believe it. So is there anything else, or was that going to be your excuse to have at me?”

“No, nothing else, except that you deserve what you’re about to get,” said Malfoy smugly, motioning Crabbe and Goyle forward.

They stopped after two steps when Harry whipped out his wand. “I wouldn’t, if I were you,” he said to Crabbe and Goyle. “I don’t think Malfoy cares all that much about your health.”

“Empty threat, Potter,” Malfoy said loudly. “I don’t think you want to be using magic, not after what happened last year. You’re already skating on thin ice.”

“I’m allowed to use it in self-defense, as you well know,” Harry replied. “It seems to me that this qualifies. I’m quite willing to try, and find out.” He hoped he wouldn’t have to, though.

“But who would believe that this qualifies? It would be our word against yours, and you’re already well-known as an underage magic offender,” said Malfoy.

“Yes, but you’re forgetting that it’s different from last year,” Harry pointed out. “Last year in the Prophet, I was an attention-seeking nutter. The deck was stacked against me, and I still got away. This year, the Boy Who Lived is back in favor at the Ministry, or haven’t you been reading the Prophet lately? Too busy visiting your father in jail? Give it a try, I don’t think you’ll like what happens.”

Malfoy looked indecisive and furious. Harry knew he was pushing Malfoy hard, but he thought it was to his advantage if Malfoy lost his temper. If he could provoke Malfoy into using magic first, he could legitimately defend himself, and there would be no question of charges. Using magic to defend himself against fists was more ambiguous.

Malfoy appeared to have made his decision. “All right... Crabbe! Goyle!—”

He was interrupted by a new voice, coming around the same corner Harry had turned on when he first saw the three Slytherins.

“What’s going on? Who are you?” Harry turned and saw his cousin Dudley, no doubt coming home from a hard day’s bullying, addressing Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle.

“Who are we?” Malfoy repeated. “We’re the ones who’ll make you regret you ever saw us if you don’t get out of here, right now.”

Harry knew he had to think fast. This could get bad very fast, or it could be his ticket out of the situation without having to use magic, if things went right. He just had to make sure Dudley and Malfoy disliked each other more than him.

Dudley, meanwhile, looked at Malfoy with a disbelieving expression. “You’ll— make me—” he sputtered.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Malfoy sneered, “so get lost.”

Oh, this is great, Harry thought. Malfoy’s mistaking Dudley’s contempt for fear. This is almost going to be fun to watch, but I still have to be careful.

Dudley looked at Harry, incredulous. “Are these your friends? Are they stupid, or what?”

“Looks that way,” Harry agreed. “I guess I should introduce you. Dudley, this is Draco Malfoy, and his... associates, Victor Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. They’re from my school. Guys,” he said, addressing the Slytherins, “This is my cousin, Dudley.”

“What are more freaks from your school doing here?” Dudley asked Harry accusingly. Turning to Malfoy, he added, “You’d better get off my block right now!”

“Freaks?” Malfoy sputtered. “Your block?” Clearly both Dudley and Malfoy thought they had all the control in this situation, and Harry wasn’t quite sure which one really did. It all depended on Malfoy’s willingness to use magic in defiance of Ministry rules. Harry was still in danger, but he chuckled inwardly: Malfoy was about to find himself in the very predicament in which he’d planned to place Harry.

Malfoy had recovered the power of speech. “No Muggle ape is going to tell me where I can and can’t go! Look at him, he looks like Hagrid’s shorter, even dumber brother!”

Harry knew Dudley hadn’t understood the word ‘Muggle,’ but from the incredulous and angry look on his face, had understood everything else just fine. Dudley’s meaty hands had already formed into fists. He looked at Harry.

“Are these your friends?” Dudley demanded.

“No, they aren’t,” Harry said quietly. “They’re... classmates. To be honest, I don’t like their attitude toward Muggles, or toward normal people. ‘Muggle’ is a wizard word that means normal people. They think they’re better than normal people.”

“We are better than Muggles! But not according to the famous Harry Potter, friend of Muggles everywhere,” said Malfoy contemptuously. “You like Muggles so much, Potter, why don’t you stay here with them all year? Leave our kind alone!”

“Harry,” said Dudley urgently and quietly, “you aren’t allowed to...” he mimicked a wand-swishing motion. “Are they?”

“Nope. Same rules as me. They’re in big trouble if they do,” Harry said confidently.

Dudley's face broke into a wide grin. "I'm going to enjoy this," he said, moving forward.

Harry decided to give Malfoy one last chance, though he knew it was futile. "Malfoy, you'd better quit while you're ahead," he advised. "Dudley's not going to have any problems. He's a boxing champion."

"What do I care if he's good at packing boxes?" Malfoy snarled. "I guess someone has to do it, but it's not going to help him any."

Harry and Dudley, who were a foot away from each other, exchanged amazed stares. Dudley actually stopped and leaned into Harry. "Is he joking?" Dudley asked, genuinely curious.

"No," Harry answered. "I think he doesn't know what it means."

"But look at him," Dudley continued, referring to Malfoy's tall but slight build. "Does he really think he can take me? Is he that stupid?"

"He doesn't think he'll have to," Harry explained. "He thinks his friends will. He doesn't know that they can't."

Dudley chuckled, and without further delay, headed toward Crabbe and Goyle. Harry stood alertly, holding his wand to protect Dudley from any magic should it become necessary.

Dudley didn't wait for Crabbe and Goyle to come after him; he went straight for Goyle, on his left. Goyle looked anxious; he was big, but not quite as big as Dudley. He nervously looked over at Crabbe and took up a defensive posture. Crabbe moved toward Goyle, but not before Dudley reached him.

Dudley feinted with a left to the chin. Goyle reflexively reacted to that while Dudley came in with a right to the jaw. Goyle went down, yelling in alarm and pain.

Crabbe came in and grabbed Dudley, intending to wrestle him to the ground, where Dudley could be held and dealt with. But Crabbe wasn't able to get Dudley to the ground. He moved Dudley around a bit and swung him off-balance, but his lack of real fighting experience showed. Dudley spun aside and threw Crabbe off him, showing an agility Harry wouldn't have expected of him. Must be

all the boxing training, Harry thought. Crabbe staggered a few steps and fell. Goyle was still on the ground, moaning and holding his jaw.

“What’s wrong with you two? Get up!” yelled Malfoy, angry and slightly panicked.

Both got to their feet, Crabbe faster than Goyle. Dudley, smelling blood, advanced on Crabbe. Crabbe swung at Dudley, but it was a roundhouse swing, and Dudley could see it coming a mile away. He easily dodged it, and punched the off-balance Crabbe solidly in the stomach. Crabbe doubled over, but didn’t go down.

Goyle finally got involved again, but Harry was sure that he now saw fear in Goyle’s eyes. Goyle swung wildly, landing only a glancing blow against Dudley’s chest. Dudley gave Goyle two quick left jabs to the chin, knocking him off balance, then connected with a right to Goyle’s jaw again. Goyle went down, yelling in pain again, more loudly this time.

Dudley advanced on Crabbe again. Crabbe was just starting to straighten up from the blow to the stomach he’d taken. Dudley feinted a right to the stomach; Crabbe used both hands to cover it. Oh, boy, Harry thought, he’s leaving himself wide open. Even I know you’re not supposed to do that. Dudley took the obvious opportunity, and finished Crabbe off with two left jabs to the chin followed by a right to the nose. Crabbe went down with what Harry was sure was a broken nose.

Dudley advanced on a seriously panic-stricken Malfoy. “Now,’ Dudley said menacingly, “you might want to think about taking back some of what you said, like the things about ‘ape’ and ‘stupid.’ I might even let you run away like the coward you are if you apologize. Whaddaya say?”

Fury and fear blazing in his eyes, Malfoy held out his wand. “I’m no coward, you moron, and if you step one foot closer I’ll curse you so badly your mother won’t recognize you!”

Dudley stopped and glanced over at Harry, whose wand was out and pointed straight at Malfoy.

“There is zero chance of that happening, Dudley. He can’t do it,” Harry said, never taking his eyes off Malfoy.

“You don’t think I’ll break the law?” Malfoy sneered. “I will, and I’ll get out of it. The name Malfoy still means something.”

“Yeah, it means ‘evil,’” Harry rejoined. “But that’s not what I meant. I mean, you can’t curse him, because I’m every bit as fast with a wand as you are, probably faster. I’ll have Protection Charms on him so fast nothing you do will touch him. And if you think I’m going to get in trouble for that, you really are dumb.” Then, to Dudley: “Nothing he does will touch you, Dudley. That’s a fact.”

Dudley smiled again. “As I was saying,” he said to Malfoy, “yes, you are a coward, and a dumb one at that. You’re a coward because you have these losers,” glancing at the prone Crabbe and Goyle, “do your fighting for you, and you’re dumb because they don’t even know how to fight. So this is what you get. Now, about that apology? One more chance before you end up on the pavement like them.”

If Harry knew one thing about Malfoy, it was that he’d rather get beaten up than apologize, especially to a Muggle. Malfoy also wouldn’t run away, finding it too humiliating. But Harry also knew that Malfoy would rather break rules than get beaten up. So, he kept his wand at full readiness.

Malfoy was in a corner, and he clearly knew it. He gave vent to his fury. “I don’t think so, you filthy Muggle scum.”

Dudley advanced on Malfoy. Harry prepared to cast the Protection Charm.

As Malfoy opened his mouth to curse Dudley, Harry shouted “Protego!” Or, rather, he tried to. No sound came out of his mouth.

Malfoy pointed his wand at Dudley and shouted, “Stupefy!”

The spell bounced off Dudley harmlessly. He continued to advance.

Harry struggled to speak, but couldn’t make a sound. He was slightly panicked, wondering what was protecting Dudley if it wasn’t him. Malfoy and Dudley, whose eyes were solely on each other, did not notice.

Malfoy tried again. “Petrificus Totalus!”

Nothing happened. Dudley was almost on top of Malfoy, who scrambled back a few steps and raised his wand. “Stupefy!” he bellowed. There was no effect.

Truly panicked now, Malfoy darted a few steps to Dudley’s right, focusing on not getting immediately hit. He glanced accusingly at Harry. “Since when can you do spells silently?”

Harry had been trying to make test noises for the past few seconds so he would know when he got his voice back. It returned in the middle of Malfoy’s question.

So, he thinks I did that, Harry thought. Who is doing it, anyway? Whoever’s following me? It suddenly dawned on Harry that that had to be the case, and that he was Silenced so that he couldn’t get in trouble by doing magic, and whoever that was had Protected Dudley. It was therefore important not to let Malfoy know that Harry hadn’t Protected Dudley, as then Malfoy, and soon the Death Eaters, would know that Harry was being shadowed.

Harry thought up a quick retort. “You liked Umbridge so much, don’t blame me that she didn’t teach you anything. At least I did something about it.” Harry liked that answer. A good comeback, and vague enough not to really answer the question. “You know, Malfoy,” Harry continued, wand still at the ready, “I’m really thinking that my cousin deserves an apology. You might want to give it your most urgent consideration.”

Dudley was at that moment almost within arm’s reach of Malfoy, who kept moving enough to barely stay out of harm’s way. “Real urgent,” Dudley agreed.

Malfoy cried, “You’ll pay for this, both of you!”

Dudley was finally within range. “I think you’ve got that backwards,” he said as he raised a fist.

There was a loud popping noise, and Malfoy disappeared.

Dudley looked dumbstruck. “What happened? Where is he?” he asked, looking around.

Harry was almost equally amazed. “He Disapparated,” Harry said, temporarily forgetting that the word would mean nothing to Dudley. At Dudley’s blank look, Harry added, “Sorry, it’s a wizard word for disappearing and reappearing somewhere else. But it’s covered under the rules, too. He’ll be in deep trouble for that, and for the spells he tried to do on you.”

Dudley exhaled in frustration. “I’d rather he’d gotten in the same kind of trouble they got in,” gesturing to Crabbe and Goyle, who were still on the ground.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Harry said. “Insulting people, then running away... you were right, he sure is a coward. What about them? Are they unconscious?”

“Nah, they’re just pretending,” Dudley said as he jostled Crabbe with his foot. Harry saw very slight signs of movement. “You see it all the time in boxing. Guy goes down, knows he’s lost, he stays down and plays dead.”

Harry felt that Dudley was probably referring more to beatings than to boxing; he knew that in boxing you could get up after the referee said the fight was over. He felt it best not to say anything, however; this could be a chance to form some rudimentary bond with Dudley, and the past notwithstanding, he felt he should try. Dudley had done him a good turn, even if by accident.

“Well, let’s just leave them there, then,” Harry suggested. “They’ll crawl home somehow, I suppose. Guess we should be getting back ourselves.”

Dudley grunted in agreement, and they headed off toward the Dursley home.

“Aren’t you going to get in trouble, though?” Dudley asked. “You used yours too, after all, and you’re not supposed to.”

“We’re allowed to use it in self-defense, which is why I didn’t end up getting punished last year, when I drove those things away,” Harry explained. “Defending non-magical people from magical attack is also allowed. I just had to be careful not to do any offensive spells. Much as I would’ve liked to,” he added.

“Say, you were pretty good with that thing,” Dudley commented, to Harry’s amazement. Dudley was usually as magic-averse as his parents. “Never even saw how you did it. You that fast?”

Harry was not about to even consider telling Dudley that he hadn’t actually done anything, that someone else had. He preferred that Dudley think that Harry had protected him, and explaining being followed would be too complicated anyway.

“Well, not to brag, but yes, I’ve been told that,” Harry admitted. “It’s just reflexes, is all. But him,” meaning Malfoy, “he thinks he’s better than everyone, both wizards and non-wizards. Couldn’t hardly be more wrong. By the way,” he continued, hoping that Dudley would be receptive to what he was trying to do, “you need to know that not all wizards are like that. People like him are really the worst. Most are perfectly friendly and good people, and most don’t have his attitude about non-magical people.”

Dudley looked at Harry suspiciously. “What about the ones from a couple of years ago? The thing with my tongue?”

“Oh, them, they’re harmless, they’re major practical jokers. At school they were constantly giving out enchanted snacks to people. It didn’t take long to learn not to accept food from them.” Harry went on to explain about Fred and George’s new business, and products like Skiving Snackboxes, and how they worked.

“...so they became real popular, everyone wanted a box,” Harry concluded. He could see that Dudley was very intrigued by the idea.

“I can see why, sounds fantastic!” said Dudley eagerly. “Wish we could buy stuff like that. Get out of a class any time you want, make a day of it... classes are always so boring..”

“At our school too.” Harry agreed.

“And it’s totally safe?”

“Oh, sure. I saw dozens of people use them, and there were no problems at all.”

Dudley raised his eyebrows. “Dozens?”

“Well, one teacher was really unpopular,” Harry explained. “People were puking left and right. She lost whole classes to those things.”

Dudley laughed heartily, no doubt imagining it. Then he suddenly stopped, so Harry did too. They had almost arrived at four Privet Drive.

Dudley leaned over and spoke quietly. “Listen, do you think you could...”

Harry’s eyebrows rose into his hair. “You mean, get you a box?”

Dudley nodded. “It would be so cool...”

Harry was stunned beyond words. He almost felt as though he’d been Silenced again. After a few seconds, he managed to say, “Yeah, I’m pretty sure I could. But if your parents found out... they would absolutely go through the roof, with no magical help whatsoever.”

Dudley grinned. “That’s no problem at all. You’d be amazed at what I do that they don’t know.”

Bet I wouldn’t, Harry thought, but of course didn’t say. “OK, I’ll be going to London in a few weeks to get my stuff for the start of the next term. I should be able to get a box and bring it back, so you can have it before your term starts.”

“Great. Thanks,” said Dudley. Harry was amazed further; he was sure that this was the first time a resident of four Privet Drive had ever thanked him for anything.

“No problem,” Harry responded. “Shall we?” he asked, gesturing to the front door.

Harry and Dudley walked into the Dursley home.

No sooner had they walked in the door than Harry heard Petunia yelling, “They’re here, Vernon! They’re here!” She came running over and started looking Dudley over worriedly. “Are you all right, Diddykins?” She threw a dirty glance at Harry. “Is everything all right?”

Dudley started to blush. “Dudley, okay, Mum? Dudley,” he muttered. He glanced over at Harry to see if he was smiling. Harry wanted to, but knew he’d

better not. He just gave Dudley a sympathetic ‘what-are-you-gonna-do?’ look. “And of course I’m all right,” Dudley continued. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I’ve just been on the phone with two of the neighbors. They say they saw both of you, fighting with three other boys. And,” she said, now glaring at Harry, “that two of you were holding your...” Harry knew she hated to say the word ‘wand’, “...things.”

Harry and Dudley looked at each other, then quickly looked away so as not to burst out laughing. Harry barely managed to keep a straight face. “I did the actual fighting,” Dudley said. “Not much point in him trying. He just kept an eye on them, so they couldn’t use their... things.” Harry nodded in agreement.

They walked into the living room. Vernon was sitting in his recliner, holding his usual after-work cocktail. He addressed Harry suspiciously. “What are you doing inviting friends to this block anyway, boy? You don’t see enough of those weirdos ten months of the year?”

“I didn’t invite them, and they’re not my friends!” Harry almost shouted. Calm down, Harry told himself. Calm down. “They are from my school, same grade as me, but they’re enemies, not friends. They came here to harass me, to pound me a bit if they could.”

Vernon’s tone suggested that that would not be a bad thing at all in his book. “Couldn’t they do that at the school?”

“No, too many teachers around,” Harry answered.

“But why didn’t they just use their...” Vernon thought for a few seconds. “Wait, same age as you, so they couldn’t either... so you had to either defend yourself with that,” meaning the wand, “and get in trouble like last year, or take the pounding.”

Harry was impressed that Vernon had pieced it together. “That’s exactly it,” Harry agreed. “Then Dudley came along and messed up their plan. Saved my bacon,” he added. Harry didn’t want Vernon and Petunia thinking he wasn’t grateful for Dudley’s help.

“Hmpf,” opined Vernon, as though he wasn’t sure that he approved of what Dudley had done. “That’s our Dudley, generous to a fault.” Harry tried very hard not to react.

“All right, now I want to hear the whole story, what really happened,” Vernon continued. “I want you,” pointing at Harry, “up in your room so he can tell us what went on without being interrupted.” So Dudley can lie about what happened without being contradicted if he wants to, Harry translated in his head. “So, off you go. We might have some questions for you later.”

Harry turned to go, then decided on one more goodwill gesture, hoping it wouldn’t be too much.

“Dudley,” he said, extending his hand. “Thanks. I owe you one.”

Dudley examined the hand for a second, as if checking for traps. He looked at Harry, who gave him a look that assured him that nothing was amiss. Dudley reached out and shook it.

“Wasn’t like it was hard or anything,” Dudley allowed.

“For you, anyway,” Harry said, and headed upstairs.

As he walked into his room, he decided that he had to know what Dudley was telling Vernon and Petunia. Harry quickly unlocked his trunk and pulled out the Extendable Ears, went to the door, and deployed them. To his surprise, Dudley gave a straightforward and accurate account of the incident. Harry was particularly surprised by Dudley’s answer to Vernon’s question about why Harry didn’t protect Dudley by using magic on Malfoy. “It’s these rules they have,” Harry heard Dudley say. “Harry couldn’t attack him, but I could tell he really wanted to. I saw his face. It was like, ‘just give me a reason.’ So now, Harry tells Malfoy that anything Malfoy does, he’ll block. So I started in on Malfoy.”

“You believed Harry?” Vernon exclaimed. “That was taking a pretty big chance, wasn’t it? He could’ve been lying, you could’ve ended up a newt or something.”

“I knew he wasn’t, Dad,” Dudley said. “You fight for a while, and you can tell a lot from people’s eyes. Harry was dead serious. I gotta say, I was surprised. With a wand in his hand, he’s not afraid of anything. There’s a look you see in the eyes of champion boxers, like they know they can handle anything, they have no fear. He had that look. I can’t explain it, but I know it when I see it.”

Vernon grunted. “You sound like you respect him.”

Dudley’s tone sounded like a shrug. “I’m not saying I want to go join up at his school or anything. I just know what I saw.” Dudley also related to Vernon and Petunia what Harry had said afterwards, that most wizards weren’t like Malfoy. The overall tone of the conversation suggested that while Vernon and Petunia’s attitude about wizards and magic hadn’t changed, Dudley’s had, for the better.

After Dudley went up to his room, Harry kept listening. There was silence for a few minutes. Then, he heard Vernon say, “Well, what do you think?”

Petunia paused. “I think I will be very happy a year from today. Harry will be seventeen, can leave this house, and no more magical people or things will trouble this house or this family. It’s bad enough we had to take in a wizard. It’s worse that it’s one who seems to have a target printed on his back. Dudley could have been seriously hurt.”

“But Harry made sure he wasn’t,” Vernon mused. “I wouldn’t have thought it. I guess that means he was telling the truth last year, that he really did protect Dudley from those dementor thingies?”

“I think so,” Petunia answered. “I don’t think any spells can do what was done to Dudley, and it’s consistent with what I heard that Potter boy tell Lily about them. Poor Dudley...”

“Maybe that’s what Dudley meant,” Vernon said, “by that look in Harry’s eyes he was talking about. If you’ve had to fight off things that can kill you, a blond kid with a wand and his two minions probably doesn’t seem so bad.”

Petunia moaned, “Oh, why did Lily have to go and become a witch? Why were we cursed with that? Why did she go and get herself killed and get us stuck

with Harry so we couldn't escape that world? All we ever wanted to do was be regular, normal people. Is that too much to ask?"

Harry rolled his eyes as he listened. His parents had died, he had had to fight off death more than once, but Petunia thought of those events only in terms of how they affected her and her family. Never would it occur to her to think about the toll those events had had on Harry. He shook his head in wonder. I hope I never become like that, he thought.

"Of course it's not, Petunia," he heard Vernon say. "That's all most people want. But you know what they say, you can choose your friends, but not your relatives." He paused. "We've done the best we could. We tried to beat the magic out of him, for his own good. We failed, but we tried. And who knows, maybe it wasn't for nothing. If Dudley's right about him having courage, maybe it was because we were strict with him, and it made him find some strength that he didn't know he had. I wouldn't be surprised."

Harry was aghast. First of all, he thought 'mean' was a more apt word than 'strict' to describe how the Dursleys had been with him. Secondly, the idea that Vernon would give himself and Petunia credit for whatever courage he had struck Harry as ludicrous as well as self-serving. Can they really tell themselves that, Harry thought? Can they really believe it? He wondered how far the capacity of people to fool themselves could go.

There was another short period of silence. Then Vernon asked, "Petunia, how long until dinner?"

"Forty-five minutes. Why?"

"I thought maybe you could pop down to the bakery and get a cake." He paused. "Celebrate Dudley's victory."

Harry imagined the suspicious look on her face. "This isn't because it's his birthday, is it?" she asked, meaning Harry.

"We don't have to say it is," Vernon replied. "We just felt like having some cake, and it was on sale. There doesn't have to be another reason."

“He wouldn’t even have had to help Dudley if he didn’t go to that awful school in the first place,” pouted Petunia.

“Very true,” conceded Vernon. “But Dudley reckons Harry did the right thing by him, and that’s worth something.” Another pause. “You don’t have to, you know,” he said, referring to the cake. “Just a thought.”

There was silence for another minute. Then Harry heard the jostling of items in a purse. Petunia said, “I’ll see what they have left. Should be about fifteen or twenty minutes.” Harry heard the front door close, the car door open and close, and the car leave.

Harry collected the Extendable Ears and lay on his bed, exhaling loudly. He then looked up to see Hedwig in her cage; he’d been so focused since he got home that he hadn’t even noticed her. “Come here, Hedwig,” he said, grabbing an Owl Treat and holding out his arm. Hedwig flew down, took the treat, and settled on his arm.

Harry needed to talk, and Hedwig was his only audience. “Why is it so hard for them, Hedwig? For the first time in fifteen years, they want to do some small nice thing for me, and they can’t even bring themselves to admit that they’re doing it? Would it be so hard for them to just say, ‘Happy Birthday, Harry’? Are they afraid it would mean they were admitting they were wrong all these years of being awful to me? What is their problem?”

Hedwig looked at him in such a way as to unmistakably convey the concept of, ‘I’d really like another Owl Treat.’ Harry rolled his eyes. “You’re such a good listener, Hedwig,” he said, sarcastically but affectionately, as he reached for another Owl Treat. “I knew you’d understand.”

Left to his own devices to ponder the Dursleys’ attitude toward him, Harry mused and mentally drifted for awhile, petting Hedwig on and off. He heard the car return, but had no urge to deploy the Extendable Ears again. He felt he’d heard enough.

Harry went downstairs when dinner was announced. He normally said nothing during dinner, and didn't tonight, but felt the atmosphere around the table to be less oppressive than usual. Vernon talked about his job, how the company was doing so well that they might be hiring soon. "Good, honest work, beats the heck out of the dole, that's what I say!" After many such dinners, Harry was extremely familiar with Vernon's political, economic, and social opinions. Harry wasn't sure that he had any opinions at all on those topics, but he had a feeling that if he was compelled to come up with some quickly, the direct opposite of Vernon's probably wouldn't be a bad place to start. Harry imagined himself sitting at a dinner table, saying "More people on the dole, that's what I say!" He chuckled inwardly.

Petunia brought out the cake she'd bought. It looked very nice; chocolate with chocolate frosting. "And now, a little dessert," she said. She started cutting it.

Dudley said, "Oh, yeah, today's your birthday, isn't it, Harry?" Petunia and Vernon looked a bit startled, as though someone had aired a distasteful secret. Harry was surprised himself.

"Yes, it is," Harry said.

"Right, erm, so it is," Vernon said uncomfortably. "Happy Birthday."

"Thanks," Harry said.

"Well, maybe Malfoy and his pals were just wishing you a happy birthday," joked Dudley.

Harry chuckled as he accepted a piece of cake from Petunia, who he thanked. "Don't think so," he said. "They forgot to bring any presents, anyway."

"Did you get presents?" Dudley asked.

"Yeah, a bunch, this morning," Harry said. Seeing Petunia's dark look, Harry added, "You know, I'm really sorry about those owls, there wasn't anything I could do. It's hard to make an owl leave if it doesn't want to." Petunia looked angry but didn't say anything. At Dudley and Vernon's blank looks, Harry briefly explained what happened when the owls delivered his presents.

"Bloody owls," muttered Vernon.

“You must have a lot of friends, then?” Dudley asked

“Yeah, I do,” Harry said. He paused thoughtfully. “I’m pretty lucky, actually.”

“Speaking of friends, what’s happening with your friends, Dudley?” Petunia asked brightly. “Anything new?”

It was abundantly clear that Petunia had asked the question in order to deliberately steer the conversation away from Harry’s friends and his world. Harry was annoyed for just a second, then he realized that he was at the table with the Dursleys, on his birthday, eating cake and talking. Compared to what was normal, that was quite amazing in itself.

The conversation drifted around the more usual topics as they ate their cake. Petunia offered everyone seconds, including Harry, and everyone accepted.

Near the end of the second piece, during a conversational lull, Dudley said, “Hey, Harry...”

Harry looked up.

“When you’re back at school, the next time you see Malfoy... tell him I said ‘hello,’” said Dudley, grinning evilly.

Harry burst out laughing. Dudley started laughing too. Vernon looked concerned; Petunia, positively alarmed. “I’d be very happy to,” said Harry between laughs.

“I’m really not sure that’s a good idea,” said Petunia. “Didn’t you say he threatened both of you? Do you really want him coming after you?” she asked Dudley.

“He’s going to come after me, for sure,” Harry answered, “but I can defend myself if I have to. He’s not going to come after Dudley.”

“Can you be sure of that?” Petunia demanded.

“There are serious laws about this kind of thing,” Harry responded. “He’s already in trouble for what he’s done today. He could get expelled from school. At the very least he’ll get a warning. He’ll be up on three charges: use of magic as an

underage wizard, Disapparating without a license and underage, and use of magic against a Muggle, er, sorry, non-magical person. All of those are against the law.”

“But won’t he say that he was just defending himself? Look at what Dudley did to his friends, after all.” Harry realized that, at least to some extent, Petunia knew what she was talking about.

“If he claimed that he was just defending himself, he’d be laughed at. First, he came to Privet Drive, looking for me. It’ll be obvious that he was looking for revenge, since I helped send his father to prison. Secondly, he—”

All three Dursleys said “What?” simultaneously. “His father’s in prison? You helped catch him? How in the world...?” asked Dudley.

“Well, it’s a pretty long story, too long to tell here, but here’s the very short version. You remember that really bad wizard Voldemort who gave me this scar?” The Dursleys all nodded. “A month ago, his helpers tried to trap me in a part of the Ministry of Magic, in London. A lot of my friends came to help me, and they caught some of his helpers. Malfoy’s dad is one of those who got caught; he’s one of Voldemort’s most prominent assistants. Now he’s in jail, so Malfoy’d like to take it out of my hide. But like I said, I can take care of myself.”

“Now, let me get this straight,” said Petunia with wide eyes. “Voldemort’s the one who, in addition to killing my sister and her husband, killed dozens of people.”

“Yes,” Harry said.

“Both wizards and ordinary people,” she continued.

“Mostly wizards, but yes,” he said.

“And this Malfoy’s father is one of his chief lieutenants.”

“Yes.”

“Are you CRAZY??” she screamed at Harry. “You will, under NO circumstances, EVER so much as mention Dudley’s name to him again! If he asks about Dudley, you will say that he was killed in a traffic accident! Is that CLEAR??”

“Mum!” Dudley said indignantly. “I’m not going to let this riffraff push me around! You should have heard how he talked to me, not even knowing who I was! He acted like some kind of king or something! I’m not going to take that!”

“You didn’t, Dudley,” his father interjected. “You stood up for yourself, and we’re proud of you. But what your mother is saying is just not to wave a red flag in the face of an angry bull. Let’s not go out of our way to stir up people who kill.”

“And not just who kill,” continued Petunia, who Harry could see was still in quite a state, “but think about why they kill. Tell us why they bother to kill ordinary people, Harry.”

He could tell she knew the answer, but he gave it anyway. “For fun,” he said solemnly.

“Yes, that is exactly what James told my sister. They kill ordinary people FOR FUN,” she shouted. “And if they become more powerful, and can violate the wizards’ laws with some impunity—and I know they did before—and they’re trying to think of what non-magical people they’d like to kill FOR FUN, don’t you think it’s possible that the boy who humiliated the son of one of their most important leaders will spring to mind?”

“Even though I’m Harry’s cousin?” Dudley asked, surprised.

“Unfortunately, Dudley, that would make them want to all the more.” To Dudley’s surprised look, Harry continued: “See, Voldemort almost died when he tried to kill me. That’s why I’m so famous in my world. No one had ever survived a killing curse before.”

“Hold on a second,” said Petunia, all of her normal revulsion about things magical gone in the face of a possible threat to Dudley. “How did you survive, anyway? If that curse always kills?”

“I only found that out a couple of years ago myself,” said Harry. “For a long time, no one knew. Voldemort came to my parents’ house not especially intending to kill my mother, just my father and me. He killed my father, and came for me. My mother stood between him and me. Even though she knew he would kill her, she

wouldn't move. He killed her, but in giving her life for mine, she activated an extremely rare magic. If you give your life for someone you love, it gives them magical protection against the person who killed you. The more you loved them, the stronger the protection is. The protection my mother gave me was strong enough to stop the most deadly curse there is, done by the most powerful dark wizard in centuries." Harry paused, feeling emotion rise up. "She literally gave her life to protect me. She was incredibly brave."

Petunia spoke to Harry in a surprisingly gentle voice, gentler than he'd ever heard her use. "I think that most mothers would like to think that they would do the same thing in that situation," she said, her eyes flicking over to Dudley for an instant as she spoke.

Harry nodded. "Probably. But very few are put in a position to do it. Unfortunately, mine was. It's not easy, knowing she had to die so I could live."

Vernon spoke up. "But then, why is it you who's famous? Why not her?"

"I think it should be her, too. She deserves it. Me? I didn't do anything. I was just a baby. But they didn't know why I had survived, so she couldn't be recognized for what she had done. I was the one who survived, and to their eyes, caused Voldemort's disappearance. My name became a symbol of victory over Voldemort. Even my scar became famous. People recognize me in public because of it. So I never did anything to deserve being famous, but life's strange like that sometimes."

After a short silence, Petunia said, "And so now that Voldemort's back, he and his friends may come after you."

Harry almost chuckled. "They already have," he said. "He's tried to kill me twice, and so have his supporters. Whoever kills me gets big points with him, so they're lining up for the chance."

Vernon looked at him sternly. "You almost sound like you don't care," he observed, "or take it very seriously."

Harry met Vernon's eyes. "I do care. I don't know... I guess it's what's called gallows humor. When you've looked death in the face as many times as I have, you get kind of a different perspective on it. But I think another reason I'm not petrified all the time is that my school's headmaster, Albus Dumbledore," he said, glancing at Petunia with the understanding that she at least knew who he was talking about, "is an extremely powerful wizard and has me very well protected. So, generally, it's not like I could die any second. I'm mostly okay as long as I don't do anything stupid."

"You mean like sticking a finger in the eye of the son of a powerful wizard who has a grudge against you?" Petunia asked tartly.

"Well, that's a good point," Harry admitted, "so let's get back to Dudley's situation. I honestly think it's highly unlikely, very highly unlikely, that anyone's going to come after him. First, as I said, Malfoy's father's in jail. Second, avenging something like this would be way, way down their list of priorities. Third, Malfoy's in trouble himself, and will end up in jail soon if he doesn't step very carefully. He's still in school, too, so he can't really come here then, either. All in all, I think Dudley's got a better chance of being knocked off by a drunk driver than by Malfoy or his dad's crowd."

"Even if that's true," Petunia said, "The current situation could change, the dark wizards could become more powerful, and they would have more time and opportunity for acts of vengeance. Are you saying that's impossible?"

Harry was impressed by her grasp of the situation. "No," he was forced to admit. "It could happen."

"And so," she pressed him, "what do you think is the best thing to do in this situation, Harry?" She appeared surprisingly calm, but he was fairly sure she wasn't.

Harry frowned. "Sorry, Dudley, but really, she's right. For sure, I shouldn't taunt him by reminding him of you, fun as that would be, and the really safe thing to do is what she suggested, tell him you died somehow. He'll laugh over it and forget that you ever existed, which would be a good thing."

Dudley frowned as well. “I really don’t like the sound of that. It’s too much like running away. I don’t run away from cowards who threaten me.”

Vernon turned to face his son. “Look, Dud, I know how you feel, and that’s a good attitude. I’d feel that way if I were you. But there are times when we don’t want to do something, but we do it because the people who care about us will be happier. So, the question is, would you rather gloat in the face of someone you’ve already beaten, or would you rather save your mother hours of worry?”

Harry was amazed that Vernon was able to put it that way, so that even Dudley could get past his pride. Dudley sighed. “Oh, all right,” he said.

Vernon slapped Dudley’s arm. “Attaboy,” he said. “I know it’s not easy, but it’s the right thing to do.”

“I’m still not happy about the danger he’s in now, even if you say it’s very little,” Petunia said to Harry. “Tell me something: When Dudley turned that corner and you saw him, why didn’t you tell him to turn around and go away so he wouldn’t be involved?”

Harry smiled; Dudley laughed out loud. “That’s easy,” Harry said. “Dudley, what would you have done if I’d told you to turn around and go away?”

“I would’ve asked who you thought you were telling me what to do, and gone ahead,” Dudley answered.

Harry glanced at Petunia. “And anyway, he spoke before I saw him; my back was to him. It was way too late.”

“I didn’t exactly know that his life was so dangerous,” Dudley admitted, “but I would’ve done the same thing anyway. Malfoy told me to go away, and well, there was absolutely no way I was going to do that.”

Petunia looked at Dudley imploringly. “I wish you would try to change that attitude when it comes to things or people that Harry’s involved with,” she half-scolded, half-pleaded. “Your life could be at stake. I’ve already lost one family member to that world. I don’t want to lose any more.”

Dudley stared ahead and nodded, not saying anything. Harry wondered if the realistic thought of his death had taken the edge off of Dudley's naturally aggressive attitude. After a pause, he asked Harry, "How many times has your life been in danger, anyway? I mean, like if you take one wrong step or lower your guard you'd snuff it?"

It was an interesting question; Harry had never thought of it like that. "Hang on, let me think," he said. He started using his fingers to count as he recollected.

Vernon was taken aback. "If you have to count them because there's been so many, that's really not a good sign," he commented.

"You're not wrong," muttered Harry as he counted. Finishing, he said, "I count seven," he said. "Oh, wait, eight if you count the dementors from last year."

"You're bloody right I'd count them," exclaimed Dudley. "Those things were horrible. You mean you've had to deal with worse than them?"

"Well, Voldemort was worse, but most of the others were not so much worse as different," Harry explained. "Dementors give you this feeling of hopelessness; they make you relive your worst memories." Harry saw Dudley give an involuntary shudder. "Other things that have almost killed me, like the basilisk or the giant spider, don't do that, but they'll kill you just as quick."

"Giant spider!?" Dudley was goggle-eyed.

"I think that's enough of this sort of talk for now," said Petunia.

Either Vernon didn't hear her or ignored her. "Giant spiders and basilisks? Is that the sort of thing your school lets roam around the grounds?"

"Of course not," Harry said. "The spider was someplace students aren't supposed to go. If I'd known it was there I wouldn't have gone. The basilisk nobody knew was there, it was living under the school for years. Those are very unusual cases."

"Which seem to happen to you very frequently," Vernon pointed out.

“My friends have mentioned that too,” agreed Harry. “Usually I don’t go looking for trouble, though, it just finds me. Because I represent a huge turning point in recent wizard history, I end up being involved in all sorts of stuff that doesn’t happen to most wizards. It’s been a very weird life.”

“Told you all along you’d have been better off not going to that place,” Vernon said.

“But there’s lots of good things about it too,” Harry protested. “I don’t mean being famous, I’d rather not have that. But I have good friends, and the Weasleys, the red-haired ones, think of me as part of their family. I wouldn’t give that up for anything.”

With an air of ending the discussion, Petunia said, “Well, if I have anything to say about it, nothing more like this will happen on Privet Drive, at least.”

“No argument from me there,” agreed Harry. “That was really good cake, by the way.” Dudley and Vernon quickly agreed.

“Let’s see what’s on the telly,” Vernon said. Dudley followed him into the living room. Harry got up to go to his room. Before he could, he heard Petunia say “Harry,” quietly enough that Vernon and Dudley couldn’t hear her.

“Yes?”

“When you go to your room, if your owl is still there, close your window. I don’t want her going out.”

“But Aunt Petunia, she—” Harry started to protest, but she cut him off.

“Just for tonight,” she said, and Harry was surprised to hear it sound more like a request than an order. He nodded and went upstairs.

Hedwig was indeed still there, so he went over to the window and closed it. Hedwig saw and let out an annoyed hoot.

“Sorry, Hedwig, it’s just for tonight.”

He lay back on the bed, confused and full of cake. He had given the Dursleys far more information about the magical world than they ever would have tolerated before, and Dudley had gone from treating him as a freak and an

annoyance to a respected equal, just like that. Was he really that impressed with what I did this afternoon? Harry asked himself. Dudley had seemed positively intrigued by hearing about Harry's danger-laden life. Vernon was treating Harry better because, Harry assumed, of Dudley's endorsement of Harry's actions after the confrontation with Malfoy. Petunia, on the other hand... her tolerance had to be due to the fact that their ignorance of the situation in the magical world could have led to life-threatening consequences for Dudley. Harry now kicked himself for having been willing to use Dudley to rub Malfoy's nose in today's events; he was just so used to dealing with Malfoy that it never occurred to him that Dudley could be in any danger. It wasn't as though he liked the Dursleys, but he didn't want any harm coming to them, either, especially because of him. Enough people ended up in danger, or dead, because of their connection to him.

After contemplating the evening's events for a while, Harry got out the Omni-view and watched some Quidditch. It reminded him of how pleased he would be to be playing again this year. A half-hour later, he put it down and picked up the new book from Hermione. He had read a little last night, but now that he knew he was going to be teaching, it seemed far more immediate and relevant. He also realized that despite the nasty shock and great anxiety he'd gotten when he learned he'd be made a teacher, he hadn't thought about it for the past few hours, since he'd run into Malfoy. Nothing like a new crisis to make you forget about the old one, he thought.

An hour or so later, there was a knock on his door. Harry said "Come in," and Petunia walked in, wearing her nightclothes and holding a letter. Obviously uncomfortable, Petunia said, "I need to use your owl. I need to send this to Professor Dumbledore."

This is almost too much, Harry thought. What's she going to do next, send away for a Kwikspell course? "You want to use owl post?" he asked incredulously.

Petunia sighed impatiently and gave him a 'don't be stupid' look. "No, I don't want to, but I have to if I want him to get this promptly. I know how to send

things to the school through the post, it just takes too long. This is important, or I wouldn't be doing it."

Harry was slightly abashed; this was obvious now that she mentioned it. "Sorry, I was just surprised. Sure, I'll send it, no problem." He reached for the envelope.

She hung onto it. "How should I address it?"

"You don't even have to; she'll know where to deliver it, no matter where he is," explained Harry. "But you can put his name on the outside. A lot of people do."

Petunia produced a pen and prepared to write on the envelope. "His first name is Albus," he said helpfully.

"Who would name their child 'Albus,'" Petunia muttered as she wrote his name on the envelope. He refrained from comment. She sealed the envelope and handed it to Harry.

He took it, walked over to the cage, and took out Hedwig. "Got a bit of a special delivery for you, Hedwig," he said to the owl. He tied the letter to her leg and opened the window. "See you soon," he said as she flew outside.

"I asked him to respond to you, not me. I don't need an owl flying at me while I'm cooking or doing laundry," Petunia said with the air of one who did not want to lower herself.

"I understand," Harry said. "I'll give it to you when I get it."

Petunia nodded, but did not leave. She stared at Harry for a moment, then suddenly said, "How could you agree to use Dudley to taunt that boy? How could you endanger him like that? Dudley couldn't know what he was getting into, but you should have! What were you thinking?"

Harry looked glum and nodded. This was the first time Petunia had ever yelled at him for something he actually deserved it for. "I wasn't thinking, is the truth," he admitted. "It just never occurred to me. I'm just so used to dealing with Malfoy that I didn't stop to think of the fact that he could come after Dudley when I'm not around to help out, or his dad's friends could in the future. But I would

never deliberately endanger Dudley, or anyone in this house.” He hoped she would believe him.

She looked at him as though not knowing what to believe, and was silent for a minute. Finally she said, “It seems as though there’s a lot that you don’t intend for to happen that happens anyway.” Harry said nothing. Petunia paused for a few seconds, and said, “Dudley’s my only child. If anything were to happen to him...”

“I’ll do everything in my power to make sure it doesn’t,” Harry promised. “So will Professor Dumbledore. I assume this is what the letter was about?”

She nodded. “He gave you to us, he put us in this danger. The least he can do is make sure we don’t suffer because of it.”

“He will,” Harry assured her. “He’s the most powerful wizard in the world, even more powerful than Voldemort. And he’s a very kind person. He’ll help.”

“And you’ll be more careful about what you say in the future,” she said. It was more a statement than a question.

“I will,” he said quietly. She nodded and left.

Harry shook his head at himself again. He still thought the chances of anything happening to Dudley were extremely low, but he knew she had a right to be concerned. He wondered what Dumbledore would do.

He suddenly felt very tired. He put away the book, got into bed and turned off the light. Thoughts jumbled in his head.

He was going to be a teacher. Malfoy had appeared on Privet Drive. Dudley wanted a Skiving Snackbox. The Dursleys had given him birthday cake and asked him questions about the magical world. Aunt Petunia had sent a letter by owl post.

It had been a strange, strange day.