

CHAPTER 13

THE UNNAMED SPELL

“But... that’s impossible,” said Harry, not knowing what else to say.

“Indeed, Harry, that is what has always been thought,” agreed Dumbledore.

“But the evidence is clear.”

“What evidence?”

Dumbledore caused the dream to switch to the point just before Voldemort Cursed Harry; they were in the Atrium again. “Watch carefully, everyone. Some of the Curse will get through to Harry, but a great deal of it is stopped by the shield.” The scene moved at normal speed, and now that they were looking for it, everyone saw what Dumbledore was referring to. The shield lit up, obviously dissipating the energy.

“But this was a dream,” Harry protested. “Wouldn’t it work differently in real life?”

Hermione answered before the teachers could. “No, apparently spells work the same way in dreams as in real life. No one understands exactly why. But many spells have been discovered in dreams. When applied in real life, they always work the same way.”

Harry raised his eyebrows; he hadn’t known this. How does she remember all this stuff she reads? Harry couldn’t help but wonder. “And it didn’t work at full effectiveness because...”

“Harry, almost no spell works with 100% effectiveness the first time it is tried. I would estimate this spell’s effectiveness at between... what, Severus, between fifty and seventy percent?”

“Closer to seventy,” replied Snape.

“For any first attempt at a spell, that is excellent. For one like this, it is astonishing. If Voldemort returns tomorrow, Harry, I believe it is highly likely that if you keep the same level of focus, the spell will be 100% effective.”

All the students except Hermione broke into wide grins. “We can’t celebrate yet, though,” she pointed out. “He still has to do it, he still has to keep that kind of focus.”

“Didn’t you see what Harry overcame there?” asked Ron. “How could Voldemort possibly make it harder for Harry than that?”

“I’m just saying, let’s not celebrate yet. When Harry goes a night without a dream, wait, without waking up screaming, then I will absolutely celebrate.”

“Miss Granger is right, this is not done,” agreed McGonagall. “Let us be optimistic, but not overconfident.”

“Don’t worry, Hermione, Professor, the last thing I’m going to be when facing Voldemort is overconfident, no matter what kind of shield I’ve got. I was optimistic last night, and I didn’t have any kind of shield; I just thought I was making progress. I never thought I’d ever come up with a new spell. How does that happen, anyway?”

“Sometimes research can uncover them, Harry, but usually they are accidents, or acts of pure creativity,” explained Dumbledore. “If it is one, this would fall into the latter category.”

“This is one, Professor,” said McGonagall. “We all saw it. There simply is no other explanation. This will work in the real world. It must.” She turned to Harry. “Do you know, Harry, what a staggering development this will be for wizardry? Such a spell has not been created in... we should ask Professor Binns, but at least a hundred years.”

“If they can learn it, the spell will be of tremendous assistance to Aurors,” added Dumbledore. “Especially at a time such as this. But one thing at a time. We will prepare for tomorrow as we have until now. Harry, simply do the same thing tomorrow as you did today; I would recommend you make no modifications of any

sort. Also, I must ask the five of you not to mention this to anyone else. I do not want the school talking about this until we know with more certainty. Harry, to anyone who asks, you should note continued progress and express optimism, but not give details. You may wish to lead others to believe that this dream was much like the rest. I also do not wish this to get back to Voldemort. He may or may not have noticed what happened, but he may believe it to be an anomaly. I would prefer he was kept in the dark as much as possible. Is that clear to everyone?” Five heads nodded in answer. “Very well, let us return to the dormitory.”

Snape left the dormitory via Fawkes. Dumbledore looked like he was about to leave, but McGonagall stayed behind, so he did too. McGonagall faced Harry.

“Harry... setting aside the discovery of an important new spell, I could not live with myself if I left here without commenting on your performance. That you are able to stay calm and focused while dealing with Voldemort is achievement enough. That you were able to do so as he took some of the most difficult moments of your life and used them to mock and attack you... I simply would not have believed it could have been done. Well, yes, the headmaster could have done it. But still, you are in excellent company. I am extremely proud of you.”

Her face was showing far more emotion than he had ever seen her display, and it touched him. He took a deep breath. “Thank you, Professor,” he said, then decided to throw caution to the winds; he stepped toward her and hugged her. She was taken aback, but after a second, she put her arms around him and hugged him back. After a few seconds, they separated. Harry wanted to say something else, but couldn’t think of anything.

She sniffled and turned to the others, as Dumbledore smiled. Looking at Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville, she adopted the sternest expression she could muster under the circumstances, and said, “If anyone breathes a word of this—“

”Professor...” Hermione interrupted. She beamed at McGonagall. “What you said to Harry was so sweet... of course we wouldn’t do that to you.” The others earnestly nodded in agreement. McGonagall nodded, rubbed her eyes, and stepped

back. Dumbledore added, “Interestingly, Harry, I think it likely that the trial under which you were operating was in fact a contributing factor to what you discovered. It is during our most stressful moments that we can reach deep within ourselves and find qualities we did not know we possessed. I suppose that I will have to stop being surprised by anything you do. Good morning, everyone.” They turned and left.

The five students sat in silence, stunned at what had happened. Finally they started talking, and they continued until well after the sun was up.

Harry was halfway through breakfast when the morning owls came into the Hall. Harry casually noted that there were more owls than usual. This was soon brought home to him by the fact that half of the owls headed in his direction. Letters, and a few packages, started falling in front of Harry like rain, completely covering his food. As the last of the owls flew away, and people saw the pile of mail in front of Harry, a laugh worked its way around the tables. Hermione raised her eyebrows in response to Harry’s surprised look. “Well, you did expect this to happen, didn’t you? You’re Harry Potter, you’re doing something brave that involves Voldemort, you’re saying his name... you didn’t expect a lot of people to want to say something?”

“Well, I never thought about it, really...” Harry trailed off.

“It’s a good thing,” said a grinning Ron, “that you use that keen intelligence of yours in your dreams, where it can do you some good, and not waste it here, in situations like this. Hermione can always explain things to you anyway.” Harry tried to look annoyed in response, but couldn’t quite manage it.

“I brought an extra bag for it,” said Hermione as she pulled it out of her larger bookbag. “Do you want to put them all in the bag, or read some of them now?”

Harry shook his head in amazement. “Well, let’s put them in the bag, but I want to check them to see if they have familiar names first. I’ll have to look at most

of them at lunchtime or after Potions.” They all started picking up letters and looking at them.

“Oh, this is from Mrs. Weasley, Harry!” said Hermione excitedly.

Ron and Ginny exchanged a look. “This is going to be good,” chuckled Ginny.

“Dear Harry,” Hermione read aloud. “If you were here, I would hug you and kiss you until you got so embarrassed you’d have to run off and hide. What you said was so incredibly sweet, thank you so much. Arthur and I were so thrilled, and he got a few dozen calls from friends and co-workers who read the article. We’ve been so worried about you, and we still are, but we know Professor Dumbledore will be taking good care of you. I’m sure my son and daughter are doing their best as well. We love you, Harry. Thank you! Love, Molly and Arthur.”

“I’m surprised it’s not longer,” Ron said. “I guess they’re too busy with all the calls.”

“Hey, what’s this?” asked Harry, who had just picked up a scroll, a rather thick one. He looked at it oddly.

“Well, open it up and find out!” urged Hermione, who Harry felt looked suspiciously like she knew what it was.

He opened it up and unrolled it; it looked to be about five feet long. He started reading aloud from the top, and couldn’t help noticing that Ginny and Hermione had huge grins on their faces. “We, the undersigned female students of Hogwarts, by affixing our signatures below, do solemnly swear the following: that, if we were Harry Potter’s girlfriend, we would...” Harry trailed off, leaned forward, and put his head in his hands in embarrassment as scattered laughter could be heard throughout the Great Hall, mostly female-sounding.

Ron leaned over and picked it up, then gleefully started reading in a loud voice: “we would not care how much danger he was in, we would stand by him and help him. We believe that his wishes in this matter are noble, but misguided, and we urge him to avail himself of the benefits that close female companionship can

offer. Signed...” Ron was starting to laugh so hard he was having trouble finishing the statement. Harry glanced at the sheet, and saw four feet of parchment’s worth of names. He blinked; there had to be about a hundred names there, which was over two-thirds of the female students at Hogwarts. Hermione and Ginny were laughing, no doubt at his reaction. Harry heard a few girls shout “Speech! Speech!” followed by others seconding the idea. Hermione and Ginny motioned for him to stand; Ron was still laughing too hard to do much of anything. When it became clear that the Hall was not going to leave him alone, he finally stood. The noise died down.

“I... I don’t know what to say, really. I’m very pleased... and really embarrassed, of course...” There was more laughter. Turning serious, he said, “In the dreams, I’ve told Voldemort about the support I’ve gotten here, and how much it’s helped. Not surprisingly, he doesn’t understand it at all. He has no idea what the support of a community feels like. But I do, and it’s great. I couldn’t be doing what I’m doing right now without the support you give me, and I know that this is another form of support. Everybody who signed it...” He felt tears start to well up, so he decided he’d better stop talking. “... thank you very much.” A round of applause went up as he sat down. A smiling Hermione offered him a tissue, which he started to refuse, then took. “I can’t believe so many people did that,” he muttered. He was still fighting off the emotion; he was deeply touched by the gesture. Suddenly struck by a thought, he picked up the scroll and looked to see whose the first name was. It was Helen Clark, followed by the other Slytherin first year girls. He noticed that the next names were other first years, and glancing down, that it went roughly in ascending order of age.

He went back to sorting through the mail, mainly because he wanted to finish his breakfast, and it was still under all the mail. He had gotten through half of it when he turned to see the five Slytherin first year girls standing behind him. He smiled and turned to face them. “So, this was your idea?”

They nodded proudly. “Some of the older girls helped us with the wording,” said Helen, “but we wanted you to know we think you’re wrong. It seems like a lot of other girls agree with us.”

“Seems that way,” Ron couldn’t resist adding.

“Yes, I’ve heard that a lot lately,” Harry said. “All I can say is, I’ll worry about it when it happens. But thank you so much for doing this. It’s great. I’m very happy.”

“But you looked like you were going to cry earlier,” a girl pointed out.

Ron snickered; Hermione gave him a dirty look. “Sometimes we cry when we’re really happy,” she explained.

“And we don’t make fun of people for doing it,” added Ginny pointedly.

“No, we don’t,” agreed Hermione.

“Well, maybe you don’t, but—ow!” Ron exclaimed as Ginny, sitting next to him, delivered a strong backhand blow to Ron’s upper arm. Hermione, across the table and unable to reach Ron, said, “Thank you, Ginny,” as the Slytherins giggled.

“I’m always going to keep this,” Harry said to the girls, “to remind me of how you supported me and cared about me.”

“Just make sure it reminds you to have a girlfriend, too,” said Helen seriously. “We really believe what that says. We think it’s important.”

Harry nodded. “I understand, and I appreciate that. It was…” Harry trailed off again. “Thank you.”

“See you in class,” one of them said, and they headed off. Harry looked up and saw Justin and Ernie standing on his other side, having already arrived while Harry was talking to the girls. They looked highly amused; Harry rolled his eyes.

“Why couldn’t you have come by before that scroll got here?”

“Well, it’s more fun this way,” explained Ernie with a straight face.

“And here I thought I was popular,” Justin added. “Those were your Slytherin firsts, right?”

Harry nodded. “Apparently, it was their idea.”

Justin smiled. "Couldn't help but notice you were having a bit of trouble keeping it together there. Not that I blame you, of course," he added, pretending to be scared, as Ginny turned toward him.

"Better say that," Ginny muttered.

"It's funny, it's like you can only handle so much emotion," said Harry, "and I've been getting so much help around here... but I can use every bit of it."

"What happened in the dream last night?" Ernie asked.

"The main difference was, he tried to goad me," Harry said, wanting not to lie and settling for leaving out many details. "He wanted me to lose my temper, because that would make it hard for me to fight him off. He taunted me about... some difficult times I've had. Believe me, you haven't been goaded until you've been goaded by Voldemort." Justin and Ernie looked like they believed it. "Just barely, I managed to stay in control, to not be goaded. In the end I got Cursed, of course, but it felt different. I'm making progress, and I'm optimistic."

"It was harder than you make it sound, Harry," said Ginny. "I wouldn't have believed what you did if I hadn't seen it. It was an incredible act of control."

"Wait a minute... you've seen it? How did you see it?" asked Ernie.

Hermione explained about the Pensieve and how it worked. "So," she concluded, "Professor Dumbledore thought it would be helpful for him to see them personally, and Harry agreed. But he also asked us to come along, he wanted us to see them too."

Justin and Ernie stared, wide-eyed. "So... you've seen Voldemort?" asked Justin.

Hermione nodded. "You couldn't imagine a more evil person. Everything he says, his attitude... it's like he considers people bugs to be squashed if they annoy him. It gives you a chill just to look at him. Now imagine that... along with this evil thing reminding you of the hardest moments of your life, when you've suffered losses, or done something you wish you hadn't, showing them to you in images so you can see how you looked, then taunting you about them... and knowing you're

going to be Cursed in a short time. That was Harry's situation. Most people would be on the ground, crying. I know I would. But he just stood there, calm as anything, and managed to project a sadness for Voldemort's lack of humanity. He never lost his control. Imagine that."

Ernie and Justin were silent for a short time. Finally Ernie said, "I don't think I can, really. It's all a bit too much."

"You're telling me," agreed Ron. "I was right there, and I felt like I wanted to strangle Voldemort for what he was doing to Harry."

"I think we were all crying, or wanted to," said Ginny. "Even Ron," she added pointedly.

Ron avoided answering directly. "Harry's been through some hard stuff," he said.

"Well, I cried a bit, and I don't mind admitting it," said Neville defiantly, as Ron looked down. Hermione looked at Neville admiringly and took his hand in support. "And I'm not even the one it happened to. Professor Dumbledore could have done what Harry did, but no one else could have. I'm sure of it."

Justin and Ernie were quiet again. Ginny said, "Yeah, that's kind of how we felt. There just isn't that much to say, at some point."

"It is hard to think of anything, compared to this," Justin agreed. He put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Hang in there, Harry. We're proud of you." Ernie just nodded.

"Thank you both, really," Harry said gratefully. They walked back to their table. Harry went back to working on sorting the mail, as he realized it was getting late, and he still hadn't finished his breakfast. He was able to take a few more bites before he had to head off to his class.

Harry had been looking forward to this class: it would be only his second class with the Slytherin and Gryffindor first years, both groups of which he felt particularly close to. He walked in the door two minutes before the class started, and everyone was there. As soon as they saw him, the students gave him a loud

round of applause. He smiled as he put down his bag on the desk. "Thank you, but I've already been embarrassed enough for one morning. For one day, in fact." The students laughed.

They asked him about last night's dream, and he gave them an account almost identical to what Justin and Ernie had been told. He explained why he needed to stay calm, and answered their questions. The lesson continued the work on the Protection Charm, introduced the Disarming Charm, and talked about more basic elements of spellcasting. Harry wanted to introduce the ideas he'd heard from Dumbledore on Friday about the mental elements of spellcasting, but he wanted to wait until he had more of a chance to discuss it with Dumbledore.

Fifteen minutes before the end of the class, a Slytherin boy raised his hand. "Excuse me, sir, but I wanted to ask you about these..." He held up a snack from a Skiving Snackbox. "We still have them."

"Ah," Harry said. So much had been happening, he had forgotten about the whole Snackbox problem. "Has Malfoy asked for them back?"

"No, sir."

"Has he talked to you at all since last Friday?"

"No, sir."

Harry shook his head, annoyed. "He was supposed to get them back from you. Looks like it slipped his mind. Are you asking me what I think you should do?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not sure I can answer that, because as a teacher, I'm supposed to encourage you not to do this. As a person, though, I'd say this: if you're going to do it, do it because you're concerned about what he might do if you don't. Who knows, he could be mad at you if you do take them, for getting him more detention, or if you don't take them, for not doing what he said."

Hedrick raised his hand. "That's exactly what we thought, sir. We really aren't sure what to do. But I understand you can't tell us this. Do you mind if we talk about this for a minute?" Harry motioned for them to go ahead. The ten

Slytherins huddled; a few Gryffindors leaned in to listen, and reported back to the rest.

The Slytherins returned to their desks. Hedrick said, “We’re sorry, sir, but we’re going to take them.”

Harry nodded. “After you do, go to Madam Pomfrey. She’ll probably complain about healthy kids going to her infirmary, but go there anyway.” They ate the Snacks, bled, threw up, fainted, and headed off to the infirmary. Harry finished up the lesson with more Disarming practice.

His next lesson was similar, of course, except for the lack of a Snackbox problem. A Hufflepuff boy asked whether the Slytherins had eaten the Snacks. When told they had, most of the students cheered, or made other noises of satisfaction. Harry felt he should comment.

“I should tell you,” he said, “that it’s usually better not to do something that hurts someone else for your own satisfaction. I should tell you that we should avoid enjoying other people suffering, even if they deserve it. I should tell you that taking the high road is better.” He paused. “But since it’s Malfoy we’re talking about...” The class roared its laughter. He smiled and put up a hand. “No, that’s a joke, really,” he said. “Look, no one deserves ten detentions more than Malfoy, that’s for sure. He was warned, and he didn’t do what I told him to do. But here’s the problem.

“Last night, in my dream, Voldemort tried to encourage me to use the Cruciatus Curse on him.” Some of the class gasped. “You might wonder why. The answer is, he wanted me to like it, he wanted me to want to do it more. In June, a Death Eater who I was fighting told me that the only way to do the spell, to make it work, is to enjoy the suffering of the other person. You have to want them to be in terrible pain, otherwise it won’t work.” The class looked very disturbed. “This is the most evil thing that can come from enjoying someone’s suffering. Now, compared to that, enjoying Malfoy’s suffering is very minor. He’s really nasty, he deserves it. But it’s a step, a first step along the road that leads to the Cruciatus Curse. Some

people allow themselves to occasionally enjoy others suffering, in situations like this, and they're still good people. I'm no different than anyone else; I was happy when Malfoy lost his prefect's badge. But you have to be careful. You have to know that it's better not to do it than to do it."

There was a silence. Then a boy raised his hand and asked, "Did you want to do the Curse on Voldemort, sir?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I didn't. There would be no point; it would only hurt me. Causing him pain isn't how I'm going to beat him. He wants me to be more like him, but there's no way I'm going to do that."

As he headed off for lunch, he suddenly felt quite tired. Not surprising, he realized, as he'd had four straight days of four or five hours' sleep. Just one more night, he thought. He had a quiet lunch with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville, then headed over to the staff room. He said hello and half-sat, half-flopped on a couch. John, sitting next to him, said, "We like to try to take it easy on the furniture, but we make exceptions for the sleep-deprived."

"Thanks, John. I feel like I could sleep, but it's probably not a good idea."

"Good thinking, you don't want to test your new spell until you're in your own bed, familiar surroundings," said Flitwick.

Harry looked at McGonagall quizzically. "Professor Dumbledore told the staff about it before our first lessons this morning," explained McGonagall.

"I'm quite excited about it, Harry," Flitwick continued. "It's an amazing development."

"I've been told, but to be honest, right now it's exciting to me only because it'll help cause this whole situation to end," Harry admitted. "Once I've had a good night's sleep, I'll think about what it means."

"Very understandable," agreed Professor Sprout sympathetically. "So, have you gotten through any of your mail?"

"No, I don't know when I'm going to do that. I've been kind of busy."

“Well, you should try to do it tonight,” she urged him. “I’m sure most of them will be supportive, and it’ll be good for you to know that people understand what you’re trying to do.”

Harry just nodded, but really didn’t think he would do it. What if a lot were negative? He knew he was doing the right thing, and didn’t want to have to read arguments against what he was doing, especially with Voldemort attacking him in his dreams every night. I’ll look at them tomorrow morning if I’m successful, he thought.

“Oh, Harry,” she continued, “I heard what you told my students about Schadenfreude. I’m very impressed, that someone so young has that perspective.”

“I’m sorry, Professor, I told them about what?”

“Schadenfreude, Harry, is a German word which means ‘pleasure derived from the suffering of others.’” She now spoke to the other teachers. “Apparently they were enjoying the idea that Malfoy would get ten more detentions, and Harry gave them a little talk, telling them that it’s the first step down a path that leads to the Cruciatus Curse. As I said, I was very impressed.”

Harry gave her a small smile. “Unfortunately, I’m now uniquely qualified to give that kind of lecture.” He paused, then looked at McGonagall. “Professor, did you or Professor Dumbledore tell them about this morning’s dream?”

“I gave the staff a general account, Harry, but of course I did not go into details, especially those of a personal nature,” she said.

Sprout nodded. “She just said that he threw the most awful events of your life back in your face and taunted you, but you stayed rock-solid calm.”

“She said she couldn’t imagine anyone else except Professor Dumbledore being able to do what you did,” added John.

Flitwick joined in. “Yes, and she said that it was the most remarkable thing she’d seen in many years, and that she was so proud of you that—“

”Yes, thank you, everyone,” said an annoyed McGonagall, as the other teachers laughed; Harry joined in also. “I did relate to Harry my opinion of his actions.”

“Yes, and she said you hugged her, Harry,” added Flitwick. “Your reputation for bravery has been further enhanced.” There was more laughter.

“Well, anyway,” said Harry, almost having lost his original point, “I asked because he was trying to taunt me into using the Cruciatus Curse on him. I would never have considered it anyway, of course, but especially since I was trying to focus on love, it seemed really absurd. But it occurred to me in class, because the Cruciatus Curse is the ultimate example of... I’m sorry, what’s that word?”

“Schadenfreude,” Sprout repeated.

“Yes, thank you, of Schadenfreude. So, it wasn’t hard to think that that kind of thing starts out with the easy stuff, like being happy about Malfoy.”

“I am certainly not happy about it, Harry, I assure you,” said McGonagall. “I am not looking forward to another ten hours with that...” She trailed off, unable to think of a word sufficiently polite yet accurate.

“By the way, how did you hear about that already, Professor?” Harry asked Sprout. “That only happened an hour ago.”

Sprout chuckled. “Word of your lessons spreads quickly. In my case, one of my students told me that you told them about Voldemort’s taunts. I asked a question, and the story came out. They don’t need much encouragement to talk about you.”

John grinned. “Or to date you.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I was wondering if that was going to come up. I couldn’t believe they did that.”

“They’re right, you know,” said John, seriously.

“Funny thing is, I never even said it. I just said I didn’t think I could deal with having a girlfriend, and he just... divined the rest. I don’t know if I even would have thought of it.”

“Well, just don’t think that you can’t change your mind just because you said it in an article. You never know what’s going to happen,” advised John.

Harry changed the subject. He was beginning to tire of that subject, mostly because everyone was telling him the same thing. There was little he could say in response, because of his lack of experience. All he knew was that it was how he felt. He found Hermione’s argument so far the most compelling, that he was not defying Voldemort if he refused a girlfriend out of fear of him.

The rest of Harry’s afternoon seemed to go slowly, perhaps because the lesson was Potions. Harry almost fell asleep twice during the lecture portion of the class, only to be nudged by an anxious Hermione. At least one of those times Snape had obviously seen him, but to Harry’s surprise, said nothing. After Potions, Harry and Hermione went back to his dormitory and rested. Fawkes sang, and Hermione fell asleep within minutes. At one point Ginny came in just to get something, but ended up lying in her bed too, entranced by Fawkes. “I’m not going to hear much phoenix song when I’m back in my dormitory, am I?” she asked.

After dinner, Hermione went to the library, while Harry and Ron had a fly, Fawkes on Harry’s shoulder, not flying free as he had before. Harry wondered if he was being more closely guarded. They watched the Ravenclaw team having a practice, and Harry flew close enough to wave at Cho. One of Cho’s teammates kidded her by yelling, “Hey, Harry, Cho’s having a bit of trouble finding the Snitch, could you help her out?”

Harry spent the rest of the evening having a go at some Transfigurations homework, but he wasn’t up for it. He was very tired, and was almost impatient for the night’s dream to be upon him. He had asked Dumbledore to make their Occlumency lesson for 9:00, so he could get more sleep before the attack happened. Finally, 9:00 arrived, as did Dumbledore. They had their lesson, Harry feeling very comfortable and confident. The lesson concluded, Harry lay down, concentrated on Occlumency exercises, and listened to Fawkes’s song. He was asleep in minutes.

Harry was suddenly in the graveyard. If he had been dreaming prior to this, he had forgotten it very quickly. He slipped easily into a state of love. He waited for Voldemort to appear.

“Good morning, Potter. Are you tiring of this yet?”

“I can think of other things I’d rather be doing, Voldemort, but I can do it for as long as you can. I think that answers your question.”

“Can you, now? How long can you go without a good night’s sleep?”

“Long enough.” Harry thought of Hermione, of Ginny. The atmosphere was one of love. He felt pity for Voldemort, who would never know love.

“Brave words, Potter. And your actions... some might say they are brave, but I say they are foolish. You will bring down ruin upon yourself. You weaken every day.”

Harry looked around and saw light on the horizon, ever so gradually getting stronger. “Sorry, Voldemort, but it’s you that’s weakening. Look over to the horizon. It’s getting lighter. Your control of this... place is getting harder for you to maintain.” He listened to the phoenix song.

“A little light in the sky is meaningless, Potter. You will be Cursed every night until you die; who knows how long it may take. Do you wish to reconsider?”

Harry prepared. “No, thanks. I never will, so you may as well get on with it.”

“Very well, Potter. Crucio!”

As Voldemort said the word, Harry activated his shield. He prepared to visualize the shield and focus on it energy being made of love, but found the shield up before he expected it to be; merely wanting it up had summoned it. Harry concentrated on love as the Curse flew toward him. It hit the shield, dissipated a little, and then disappeared. Harry was totally unaffected.

Voldemort looked at him in disbelief. Harry said nothing, but simply looked at him with sadness and pity. Finally he said, "It's over, Voldemort. You've lost. There's nothing more you can do here."

Voldemort was furious, obviously thinking that nothing Harry could have done could have affected the spell. He raised his wand again. "Crucio!"

Again Harry's shield snapped on nearly without his conscious thought; the mere intention to use it seemed to summon it. Voldemort's Curse hit it and again dissipated, in thoroughly unspectacular fashion. Harry didn't think he had ever seen more frustration on anyone's face.

"You can try to Curse me all night long, Voldemort, it isn't going to work," Harry said, now feeling even calmer. "I'm going to keep saying your name, and encouraging others to do so. We're going to fight you, and we're going to win." He paused, and looked at the horizon. "Really getting bright out, isn't it? Not quite the right effect for a graveyard."

He stared at Voldemort, filled with sorrow and pity. "I wish there was something I could do for you, Voldemort, but I know you're beyond help. I wish I could help Tom Riddle. He must still be somewhere. Maybe it's not too late for him."

One more time, Voldemort tried. "Crucio!" Again the shield snapped on, and again there was no effect. Voldemort made a strangled noise of frustration and was gone. There was only the graveyard, with the sky a brilliant white, but comforting rather than blinding.

Suddenly Harry was awake. He looked to his right, and saw Hermione's worried face; he realized that she expected him to wake up screaming shortly. Her look changed to confusion, then to happiness as he sat up. "Did you have the dream yet?" she asked quietly, so as not to wake the others. Her tone sounded like she felt it was something she dared not hope for.

Then Harry saw Dumbledore, who was again at the head of the bed. He had obviously been summoned by Fawkes, who had recognized that the dream was starting. Harry looked at both, and nodded. "I had it. The spell worked. It's over."

Still trying to stay quiet, Hermione leaped into the air in joy. She pulled Harry off the bed and hugged him fiercely. He hugged her back the same way. He whispered into her ear, "Thank you, thank you so much... you've been so good to me, all of you..." She squeezed him again in reply. They broke apart after a few more seconds.

He then looked at Dumbledore, who was standing now, looking pleased to have watched Harry and Hermione celebrating. Harry suddenly felt waves of love for this man who had cared for him, protected him, and taught him the connection between the word 'love' and what was in his heart. Filled with euphoria, he stepped toward Dumbledore and hugged him; Dumbledore hugged him back. Harry looked at him and quietly said, "I love you. I couldn't have done this without you. I'm so grateful..."

"If you love me, Harry, there is one thing you must do," said Dumbledore, with the familiar twinkle very obvious in his eyes. "You must call me Albus from time to time."

Harry chuckled, still deliriously happy. "I love you, Albus." Hermione looked on in delight.

"I love you too, Harry," Dumbledore replied. "I am very proud, and still a little amazed, at what you have accomplished. Would you like to go back to sleep now?"

Harry shook his head. In a way he was still tired, but was much too happy right then to sleep, and said so. "I should get the dream in the Pensieve before too much time goes by. But we don't need to wake the other professors, do we? They can see it later, there's no urgency."

Dumbledore nodded. "Let us watch it in the Pensieve now, then. I do not think the memory will fade, but if we watch it now, then I will remember it as well,

so there will be no chance of anything lost. Hermione, I assume you will want to see it as well?”

She beamed at him. “Are you kidding? Of course! I want to see one of these that has a happy ending!”

They were all still speaking in whispers. Dumbledore whisked the Pensieve over, and Harry used his wand to extract the memory. Soon they were all in the graveyard, watching the dream. No one said anything until it was over, but Hermione gasped the first time she saw Harry’s shield work completely. After Voldemort disappeared, the sky stayed white, rather than reverting to the beginning of the dream, as it usually did. “I rather like this skyscape,” Dumbledore mused.

“Oh, Harry, I’m so happy, so happy,” exulted Hermione. “It’s so amazing, what you’ve done. And that spell... not only is it effective, it’s beautiful. I’ll bet they end up calling it a Potter Shield, or something like that. They should, anyway.”

“You of all people, Hermione,” said an amused Dumbledore, “must know that spells are almost never named for the wizards who discover them. But these circumstances are unique, and they may merit a change in policy.”

“Oh, yes, let’s name it for me,” Harry said sarcastically but humorously. “I’m not nearly famous enough as it is.”

Hermione was still too exuberant to be annoyed. “But you deserve it! Look at what you had to go through to find it! That would have broken most people!”

Harry shrugged. “I’m not sure I care whether it gets named for me, really. If people can use it to avoid getting Cursed, that’ll be more than enough for me.”

Hermione looked puzzled. “That reminds me, Harry, what’s the incantation for this spell? I never heard you say one.”

He hadn’t thought of that. “There isn’t one. At least, not that I know of. I never used one, or thought of one. I just did the spell.”

“I had noticed that, Hermione,” said Dumbledore. “In Harry’s case, as his spells are operating at 100% effectiveness whether vocalized or not, it was not

necessary for him to employ any particular incantation. If there is one, it may come to Harry at some point when he is not thinking about it.”

“Professor, are any other spells made up of the energy of love?” asked Harry.

“No, Harry. This is the only one.”

“I have to wonder now why nobody ever thought of that. I mean, love is so powerful, it seems obvious when you look at it.”

“The discovery of spells is more art than science. Look how you came up with yours. I have no doubt that people have thought of it before, but you are the first to actually find one. Unknown spells are very, very hard to find.”

“I guess I can see now why you found this so amazing yesterday. It’s funny how it showed up just when I needed it most.”

“It is really not strange at all, Harry,” Dumbledore explained. “Think about how families find out that their children are magical. Even without a wand, the children summon magic when they most need it: when in danger, terrified, or angry. This situation was roughly analogous to that.”

“Professor, now that this has worked in the dream, we need to make sure it works in the real world. We should do a test.”

“That makes sense, but the only way to do a test is for someone to use the Curse on you.”

“It doesn’t matter; I’ll block it. You said spells work the same way in reality as in dreams. You saw this. You know it’ll work,” Harry said stubbornly.

Dumbledore hesitated, then nodded. “Very well. I will arrange for a preliminary demonstration tonight. The Ministry will want to send an observer. If the spell is successful, as I am sure it will be, there will be another, more formal, test of it shortly thereafter.

“We should exit the Pensieve now, so you two can get to sleep. It will not be strictly necessary, but I will watch over Harry for the rest of the night, Hermione.

You will not be bothered any further by Voldemort, I am nearly certain. But I will not be sleeping much anyway; I have much to think about. I will stay.”

Harry, Hermione, and Dumbledore left the Pensieve, and were back in the quiet of the boys’ dormitory. Harry and Hermione exchanged whispered ‘good nights’ and got into their beds. Dumbledore sat in his chair, having moved it away from Harry’s bed. Fawkes started singing. Getting comfortable in his bed, knowing for the first time in days that his sleep would not be interrupted, Harry focused on love, and his friends—not as a relaxation technique or anti-Voldemort weapon, but just because he wanted to, to appreciate what his friends had done for him, had helped him do. He was again asleep quickly.

Harry awoke to see that the sun was up; he had missed seeing sunlight when he awoke for a few days. He sat up, remembered what had happened, and jumped out of bed. Dumbledore was still there, awake, in his chair. All the others were awake, and broke into wide smiles when they saw him.

“Hermione and Professor Dumbledore told us everything, of course,” said Ginny, walking towards Harry. “We’re so happy, we’re so excited...” She threw her arms around him in triumph.

“Thank you, Ginny, thank you for everything you did. You were wonderful.”

“I was so happy to do it, Harry. We all were.” She released him and stepped back. Harry stepped forward to hug Hermione. “Did you get enough sleep? Are you okay for today?” he asked.

She nodded, “Yes, thanks,” and let go.

Harry approached Ron, a wide grin on his face. Ron grinned back and extended his hand. Harry just shook his head, still smiling.

Ron figured it out, and rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on...”

“Too bad, Ron,” said Harry. He stepped forward to hug Ron, who sighed and hugged Harry back. “Thank you, Ron. Especially for bringing me back that first night.”

They stepped apart. Ron's face was now a bright red, but he smiled. "No problem, mate." Harry saw the girls trying not to laugh at Ron's discomfort.

Harry moved on to Neville, who didn't flinch or look uncomfortable. He hugged Neville, who returned the gesture. Harry stepped back and said, "Thanks for staying, Neville. It meant a lot to me." Neville just nodded, smiling and overwhelmed.

Dumbledore stepped forward. "Harry, the school will want to know what happened. The first years, not having heard you scream, will have relayed that information to others, but people will want a few details. So you will not be besieged with requests, I thought I would make a brief presentation at breakfast. I would also like to show a small amount of the dream to the school, to illustrate things properly. I hope that will be all right with you."

"Sure, sir, whatever you think is best," Harry agreed. He would be happy not to have to tell it twenty times, enjoyable as this story would be.

"Very well, then... if you will change into your day clothes, I will escort you down to the Great Hall, where I believe most everyone is waiting." The students closed the curtains on their beds and changed clothes, then followed Dumbledore out.

They entered the Great Hall to find virtually everyone there; all the teachers were present at the teachers' table, including Hagrid, which was a rarity. A loud buzz went up when people caught sight of Harry and the others. Dumbledore strode to the center of the teachers' table.

"I wish at this time to give you all some information which will be of great general interest," he announced, using the magical microphone. "I am pleased to announce that Harry had a dream encounter involving Voldemort last night, but was not Cursed. He has prevailed, and will not be disturbed again."

A huge cheer burst forth from the audience. Plates and cups were banged against tables and each other. A few people hugged. Except for Snape, the teachers applauded enthusiastically. The din went on for almost a whole minute.

“Yes, we are all most gratified,” agreed Dumbledore when the Hall got quiet enough for him to continue. “But the means of his victory is perhaps even more remarkable than the victory itself. Harry did not dodge or avoid Voldemort’s Cruciatus Curse. He fashioned a defense against it.

“To properly understand what I am saying, it will be better for you to see it with your own eyes. Some of you may know that there are means to retrieve images and scenes from dreams. We have done so with Harry’s dream last night. It will be displayed in the air, above me, with audio.

“I warn you that Voldemort will appear and speak in these images. The images begin approximately thirty seconds into Harry’s dream.” Dumbledore waved his wand, and Harry saw himself and Voldemort, in the graveyard, floating above the teachers’ table. There were quite a few gasps from the audience.

The images moved. Harry saw himself say, “Sorry, Voldemort, but it’s you that’s weakening...” There were gasps again; Harry suspected they were due to his calm, or perhaps that he addressed Voldemort directly by his name. They gasped again when Voldemort threatened Harry, and yet again when Harry calmly defied him. Harry had to remember that even what was being shown here, while by no means the worst of what he had gone through, was probably very frightening to the other students. They had never seen Voldemort before. Harry wondered if by showing this, Dumbledore was trying to accomplish something similar to what Harry was doing with the name: to diminish fear with familiarity.

Then Voldemort hit Harry with the Curse, which Harry’s shield stopped. Each of these actions caused more gasps. Harry glanced down the Gryffindor table and saw a row of stunned looks as people watched, mesmerized. As the dream images continued, Harry saw that Dumbledore had edited out what he said near the end about Tom Riddle. He supposed that Dumbledore felt that it would not be understood properly unless one knew what was said in the third dream. At the end of the dream, when Voldemort vanished, defeated, there was only silence in the

Hall. Harry had wondered whether there might be applause, but he gathered that everyone was still too stunned.

“Quite remarkable, both Harry’s composure and the defense he used. Now, I will summon up a closer image of how Harry appeared just before the first attempted Curse by Voldemort. Harry will now activate his spell,” continued Dumbledore, as the Hall watched Harry’s shield suddenly appear. “Now watch carefully as Voldemort’s Curse reaches the shield.” Everyone watched the Curse dissipate and fizzle quietly.

“Excuse me, sir,” shouted a seventh year Ravenclaw, “what spell was that?”

“I cannot give it a name,” Dumbledore explained, “for it is something that Harry... invented, or discovered, whichever you like... yesterday. It is a previously unknown spell, and it is capable of stopping the Cruciatus Curse, something heretofore believed to be impossible.”

Again there was no sound in the Hall, just a stunned silence. Dumbledore continued, “The first test of this spell will take place tonight in the Great Hall at 7:00 p.m., after dinner. Anyone wishing to stay and view the test may do so. That is all for now. Congratulations again to Harry, and thank you for your attention.”

Dumbledore stepped away from the podium. There was silence for a few more seconds, then a few students started clapping. Gradually, more and more joined, and finally there was a thunderous ovation. Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Neville were looking at him proudly. He smiled at them, then closed his eyes and let the feelings wash over him. He reflected that what he was truly happy about was that Voldemort was gone from his mind, but this... this was almost as good.

The applause finally died down, and Harry started on his food. There was a lot of talking in the Hall, as people exchanged impressions and speculations. The owls came in, and dropped another twenty pieces of mail in front of Harry. He realized that he could now look at yesterday’s mail without fear of the effect it would have on his morale. His friends didn’t talk to him, sensing that he needed to eat in peace.

Harry had gotten through most of his food when he saw Ernie and Justin walk up; Harry stood to greet them. “Hi, guys,” Harry said. “I wanted to thank you again for coming by every day. Like everything else, it helped.”

They looked at him and nodded, but didn’t say anything. Finally Justin said, “You know, it’s kind of hard to know what to say, after seeing what we just saw. I feel like asking you if you plan to walk on water next.”

Harry laughed. “If it’d help me get away from Voldemort, I’d give it a try, believe me. I’m a bit surprised too, especially about the spell. It was such a strange thing.”

“I see your 100 came in handy,” said Ernie. “I noticed that your spell doesn’t have an incantation, but for you, it doesn’t need one, does it?”

Harry nodded. “Bet you’re one of the very few people that picked up on that, Ernie. No, no incantation came to me. I kind of wish it had, just so other people could use it more easily. But I was happy to get what I got, that’s for sure.”

“So, you have no idea where it came from?” Justin asked.

Harry shook his head. “It just came to me, out of the clear blue sky. I’ve never had anything like that happen before. When you’re in a situation like that, a lot of times you don’t think, you just do things.”

“I pray, Harry, that I’ll never find myself in a situation like that,” Justin said. “But I did get to see what you were talking about yesterday. He’s just... like you said, Hermione, evil. He gave me chills.”

“By comparison, the dream you saw was mild,” Hermione replied. “Yesterday’s was much worse, much harder for Harry. Professor Dumbledore thinks that’s how he came up with the spell, that he was forced to... reach deeper into whatever abilities and resources we have. Harry was pushed really, really hard, and that’s what he came up with. It’s one of those things about people that we don’t really understand all that well.”

Ernie nodded. “I feel like there’s a few things that I don’t really understand all that well... like how Harry did what we just saw him do. But maybe there are things we’re not meant to understand.” He extended a hand, which Harry shook.

“Well, Harry, there’s one thing I can say for sure,” said Justin, shaking Harry’s hand as well. “In that interview, you said that it was strange being famous when you did nothing to merit it. You’re not going to be able to say that anymore; at this point, you’d be famous even if you weren’t Harry Potter. And deservedly so. Congratulations.”

“Thanks, you two. See you tonight?”

“Yeah, I don’t think we’d miss it,” Justin said as they walked away.

The day was a strange one for Harry. He still felt happy and triumphant, but he felt that people were treating him strangely. His students especially were more subdued than usual; they seemed to be gaping at him half the time, and nervous when he called on them. He gave Ron and Hermione his impressions at lunch. They smiled.

“I know your modesty wouldn’t have let this occur to you, Harry,” said Hermione, “but think about how this looks to them. All they’ve heard all their lives about Voldemort is how terrifying he is, how he’s to be feared, how many he killed, and so on. Then they start your classes. First off, you’re the Boy Who Lived, so that’s pretty impressive right there. Then, you—unique in wizarding society, except for Dumbledore—use his name, and encourage them to do so. To them, that already makes you really brave, really amazing. Now you invent a new, powerful spell, and use it to defeat Voldemort in a battle of wills, facing horrible pain. To them, you might as well be Merlin, or something. They’re probably in awe of you right now. It’ll go away, hopefully, but you’ll have to deal with it for awhile.”

“Would it help if I made fun of you a bit, Harry?” Ron offered. “It’d be tough on me, but hey, anything for a friend.”

Harry chuckled. “Well, don’t stretch yourself. Only if something really good comes up. Like if I get another scroll.”

“Well, we can’t really hope for that, can we,” Ron said. “Ah, that was a good one.”

“With your classes, I’d suggest maybe you try more humor, make sure you make some jokes if you can,” suggested Hermione. “It might humanize you more.”

Harry nodded. “I try to do that anyway, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

After lunch, Harry went to the staff room, as usual. He was applauded as he entered, and got pats on the back from John and Flitwick, and a kiss on the cheek from Sprout. He was asked how he was doing, and told them what he had told Hermione and Ron. “Hermione thinks... this is embarrassing to say, but she thinks they’re in awe of me.”

Flitwick smiled. “Well, we’re in awe of you, Harry, why shouldn’t they be?”

Harry couldn’t help but grin. “Well, I think you’re just teasing me, but—“

Flitwick interrupted him. “Anyone in this room who thinks I’m teasing Harry, raise your hand.” Nobody did. “Harry, I don’t know if you’re aware of how what you did looks, but... watching this morning, I practically had an accident just looking at Voldemort.” This got a chuckle around the room. “He inspires terror in mature, adult wizards. I’m not any kind of coward, but I couldn’t imagine myself doing what I saw you do this morning. I just don’t think I would have it in me. We know you’re only sixteen, we know there’s still a lot you have to learn and experience. But what you did is literally awe-inspiring. You have to understand that.” Other teachers nodded.

Harry found it hard to believe, but decided not to argue it. “But even if that’s true, you would be in awe of what I did, not in awe of me. You all would still tease me, treat me the same way. But the students are acting like they’re in awe of me, like I’m some... I don’t know, but something. I want them to look at me like they did last week.”

“They will, Harry, you just have to give them time,” advised Sprout. “You taught them within a very short time of them seeing you do something that was... well, as Professor Flitwick said, awe-inspiring.”

“You should have seen what he did on Monday morning, in the fourth dream,” said McGonagall. “This one looked easy by comparison, I assure you.”

Harry nodded. “Also, today I had the comfort of knowing I had that spell, and that it would probably work. I was actually looking forward to him trying the Curse, so I could find out for sure.”

John yawned ostentatiously. “No, nothing at all awe-inspiring about that.”

“By the way, for that demonstration tonight, who’s going to do the actual Curse?” asked Harry. “I hadn’t thought about that.” The other teachers looked uncomfortable.

“Professor Dumbledore was just in here discussing that,” said McGonagall, a cloud seeming to form over her face. “It is his intention to do it himself.”

“What?!” Harry almost screamed. He jumped to his feet. “Absolutely not! No! He can’t!”

“We offered similar opinions, Harry,” McGonagall said softly. “He was insistent. He would not ask anyone to do this, although several of us volunteered to do it. He felt he could not shirk this.”

“He’s damn well going to shirk this,” Harry said furiously. “I’ll back out, I won’t do this if he’s that determined. I won’t let him. He can’t do this.” He stormed out of the staff room, heading for Dumbledore’s office.

He knocked and walked in; it looked like Snape and Dumbledore had been having an animated conversation. Normally Harry would have been curious as to what it was about, but now he didn’t care. Dumbledore turned to Harry.

“Harry, what can I—“

”You’re not doing this,” Harry said hotly. “I won’t let you. I’ll back out of the whole thing.”

Dumbledore paused, regarding Harry with fondness and patience. “I did plan on telling you myself, but—“

”I asked them. They told me.”

“I see. Harry, there are some things one cannot ask others to do—“

For the third time in a row, Harry interrupted Dumbledore. “You wouldn’t have to ask them, they said they volunteered. And I can’t let you. I can’t do it.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry with affection. “I understand, and I appreciate it. But what kind of leader would I be if I delegated out unpleasant tasks to those under my command?”

“You would be,” Snape said, “the kind who recognizes reality, the reality that tasks are best performed by those who can best accomplish them, with the least difficulty. Professor Potter,” he said, turning to Harry, “who do you feel should perform the Curse?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Harry asked in exasperation. “You, of course.”

“I have been telling this to the headmaster for the past ten minutes, but he will not accept what I say. Perhaps he will accept it from you.”

Harry’s eyes flashed. “He will accept it from me, or I’m not doing it.” He turned to Dumbledore. “I’m serious.”

Dumbledore was still patient. “Harry, imagine a situation in which someone had to Curse Ginny Weasley, and it had to be you, Ron, or Hermione. Would you allow one of them to perform such a task?”

Harry had to pause. “I wouldn’t want to,” he admitted, “but if she pleaded with me to let it be someone else, and there was someone much better suited to do it... I’d like to think I would. If it would mean that much to her that I not do it.”

“Why do you think, Harry, that Professor Snape is better suited to do this?”

Harry was almost speechless; this seemed so obvious. “The person doing the Cursing has to want to cause the other person to suffer. I know how you’d feel, doing that. You love me! He doesn’t even like me! Do you know how many times I’ve seen him look at me as though he’d like nothing better than to do the Curse?” Realizing what he’d said, he quickly looked at Snape and said, “No offense.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “None taken.” They looked at Dumbledore.

“Harry, what you have just said is precisely the reason that I do not want Professor Snape doing this.”

Snape seemed very frustrated. “I am in control, Headmaster. You fear needlessly. It is only a few Curses, done for a very specific reason, under controlled circumstances. You would be emotionally damaged, while I would not, which is the point I assume Professor Potter was making.”

“And my point, Severus, was that there are things that Harry does not know; he cannot evaluate the cost or risks to you.”

“Even if he were told, he could not do so. But he has intuitively grasped the cost to you. You and I know the effect on me, and only your stubbornness prevents you from recognizing that the cost to you is much higher than it is to me. Even if he knew, he would choose the same.” He paused, looking at Dumbledore. “And that disturbs you. You would not want him to choose your interests over mine. Headmaster, he loves you. What else can he do? If you love him, you should do as he wishes.” Harry was stunned; he had never heard Snape have the concern for anyone that he was displaying for Dumbledore, nor did he imagine he would ever hear Snape using the word ‘love.’

Dumbledore gazed at Snape levelly. “I love you both, Severus. Perhaps in different ways, but I would not easily put my interests above yours, or even his above yours.”

“And you care nothing for the distress you know it would cause those who care about you?” Snape pressed. “You can suffer doing what I could do, in which case those you care about will suffer too, including him,” he said, pointing to Harry. “Or, you can suffer the regret of letting another shoulder what you feel is your burden, in which case, you suffer alone. Which is better?”

Dumbledore looked at Harry. “This is one of the classic types of moral dilemmas, especially for people in leadership positions. You will experience it one day, no doubt sooner than you would like. If you love those under your command, you will wish to take for yourself the most difficult tasks. But if they love you, they will wish to do it for you.

“I assure you, Harry, that this is not as clear-cut as it seems to you. There is information you do not have, which I cannot tell you at this time without Professor Snape’s permission. This is not as easy for him as you think it is.”

“But is he right, sir?” Harry asked Dumbledore, his tone near pleading. “Is the cost to him lower than it is to you?”

“We cannot say definitively, Harry, in situations like this. But he may be correct.”

“I am correct,” said Snape softly. “You know it. Trust me, Albus.”

Dumbledore looked at Snape in surprise. If Harry had to guess, he would have guessed that this was the first time Snape had ever called him that. Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. “Very well, Severus. You will perform the Curse.”

“Thank you, Headmaster,” Snape said.

“Thank you, Professor,” Harry said to Dumbledore. He turned to leave, as did Snape, who followed him out. They walked together; obviously both were headed to the staff room. “Thank you, Professor,” said Harry sincerely.

“I did not do this for you, Professor,” said Snape evenly. “I did it for him.” Harry met his eyes as they walked. “I know. That’s why I’m thanking you.”

Snape seemed to consider this. “You’re welcome,” he said, just before they entered the staff room.

They walked in, and all eyes were on them; the staff obviously knew what the discussion had been about. Snape said nothing, so Harry said it instead. “Professor Snape will perform the Curse tonight.”

There were a few low whistles in the room. Harry looked confused, which McGonagall noticed. “I have been at Hogwarts for forty years, Harry, and I can count the number of times the headmaster has changed his mind on the fingers of one hand. I would be most interested to know how it was managed.”

Snape glanced at Harry, a silent request not to elaborate. Harry simply said, “We ganged up on him. It was hard for him to say no to both of us.”

“That must have been quite some ganging up,” mused Flitwick.

“You should get your things ready, Harry, as you have a class in a few minutes,” said McGonagall. “Mine, you may recall. I assume you have done all your homework and practice?”

“Would you really assume that?” asked Harry, deadpan. The others laughed. “Actually, I did have a go at it last night, but for some reason, I couldn’t keep my mind on it. I imagine I’ll do better next week.”

“I daresay you will,” she said, to more laughter. She got up, and they left the staff room together.

There was an atmosphere of expectation at dinner in the Great Hall. Harry had just finished eating, but like everyone else, he wasn’t going anywhere. It would not be long before the demonstration of the new spell would take place. Harry had little doubt that it would work, so he was not worried, but he could tell his friends were. He tried to reassure them, but they were not convinced. Finally, he said, “Do you think that McGonagall and Dumbledore would let this happen if they thought there was any chance of it not working?” They saw his point, but were still not put totally at ease.

“Can I join you guys for a minute?” They looked up and saw Hugo Brantell smiling down at them. They gave him a cheerful hello, and Ginny and Hermione separated so he could squeeze in. “Ah, a good spot, right between two attractive girls,” he said.

“Hey, that’s not fair, you’ll know whether we believe you or not,” said Ginny.

Hugo did an impression of an overblown reporter, stage-whispering, “I’m here at the Gryffindor house table here at Hogwarts, the site of the most incredible five days in wizarding history, and I’m talking with the man of the moment, the one on whom all eyes are on, the one to whom others look for guidance and leadership.

So, tell me, Ron, how does it feel?” All the Gryffindors near them burst out laughing, including Ron.

Ron ran with the joke. “Well, I don’t mind telling you, Hugo, it’s a little tense. I have to sit here and watch, and you know how hard that can be. But I’m bearing up well, thank you very much for asking.”

“I assume you’re here covering this, not just as a spectator?” Harry asked.

Hugo nodded. “I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but it’s a huge story. This could be an enormous development in wizardry. Assuming everything goes as planned tonight, I’ll be here tomorrow too.”

“What happens tomorrow?” asked Ginny.

“It’s a little bit similar to tonight, only more formal and without such a big crowd. Tonight is just to prove the spell exists informally, so the Ministry knows there should be a formal display of it. Tomorrow, three Aurors will come here, and test the spell, make measurements, ask Harry detailed questions about the spell, bother him about why there’s no incantation, and so forth.” Harry smiled, but Hugo saw beneath it. “I’m sorry, Harry, I know you’re not happy about that. I think it’ll come with time.”

Harry nodded. “I just want people to be able to use it. The annoying thing is that people really can’t practice it. You just have to use it in the situation and hope it works.”

“Well, you did last night. Professor Dumbledore showed me the images he showed everyone at breakfast. You did pretty well.”

“Thanks, Hugo,” said Harry.

Ron sputtered. “Pretty well? You must be kidding—“

Hugo started to laugh. “Yes, I am, Ron. Just curious, does anyone know the idea of my joke?”

“You were saying what Harry wishes everyone would say,” supplied Hermione, “instead of telling him what an amazing, awe-inspiring, unforgettable,

tremendous, and stupendously brave thing he managed to do, which he's been hearing all day and is getting sick of."

"You really do know the answer to everything, don't you?" smiled Hugo, as Hermione looked at him in feigned annoyance. He turned to Harry and said, "After it's over, I wanted to interview you about it, just a few questions. Well, no more than a dozen, anyway. Professor Dumbledore said I should do it so that all the students can hear. I wanted to make sure that was okay with you."

Harry smiled. "Well, is it?"

Hugo chuckled at the challenge. "You shouldn't test me, Harry, your eyes are too expressive. Ah, I see you've been told that recently. Anyway, you're not thrilled about it, but you recognize that people are legitimately interested, so you'll do it for that reason. If it was strictly for people's entertainment, you'd be looking for the nearest door."

"Seeing Professor Lockhart at a young age kind of put me off the idea of wanting publicity," Harry agreed.

"So, Hugo," asked Ron, "have you talked to many people here yet today? What's the mood like?"

"You probably know too, Ron, but I know you think I might see something you don't. People are overwhelmed at what Harry did; frankly, myself included, but more or less everyone. Some older Slytherins acted like it was no big deal, but they were completely lying." Everyone chuckled. "I could tell you in more detail, but I'm pretty sure Harry doesn't want to know."

Ron snorted. "Of course he doesn't, why do you think I asked you?" Harry smiled and playfully shoved Ron. "Can you imagine, Harry," asked Ron, "what Fred and George would be saying if they were here?"

Ginny giggled. "They'd be talking about where your statue was going to go up, taking your measurements for it. Or telling the first years that you were born on a mountaintop in a thunderstorm. They'd really be having fun."

“I visited their shop today, by the way,” said Hugo. “They made lots of jokes, and were very understated about it, but they were thrilled about the mention in the article, and they’re very proud of you. Even you two,” he added to Ron and Ginny.

Forgetting who she was talking to, Ginny asked, “They said that?”

“Of course not, Ginny,” replied Hugo with amusement. “This was me cheating. But they did say something about being glad there were still two Weasleys on the Quidditch team.”

Ginny’s response was cut off by Dumbledore’s magically enhanced voice. “May I have your attention, please. We will now witness a brief demonstration of the spell which you were shown at breakfast this morning. In attendance are two Ministry of Magic Aurors, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Hubert Dawlish, and journalist Hugo Brantell. Harry, would you step up here, please?” Harry got up and walked to where the teachers’ table usually was; parts of it had been moved so people could see more clearly.

“Harry, is there anything you need before we proceed?”

“I think I’m okay, just give me a minute to get ready,” Harry said. He closed his eyes and felt love. It seemed almost palpable, in this large room, the support of his fellow students and fellow teachers. He could sink into it easily, he could feel it all around him. He took out his wand and nodded to Dumbledore. “I’m ready.”

“Very well. I shall count down from five to zero. On zero, Professor Snape will issue the Curse. Five, four...”

Harry had forgotten about the crowd, he was peaceful and comfortable.

“Three, two, one...”

Harry still felt relaxed, but he felt the atmosphere change, only a tiny bit, as if things were getting dark. Somehow, he thought, he would know the spell was coming even if not for the countdown.

“Zero—“

”Crucio!” As Snape said the word, as in the dream, the shield snapped on almost automatically. The spell hit the shield and quickly dissipated. The shield lingered for a few seconds, and went off. The crowd erupted in cheers. Harry smiled, though he had fully expected this. He looked over at his friends, very happy to see them so happy for him.

Dumbledore said, “Thank you. Most impressive, Harry. We will now do it one more time, for confirmation. I will count down from five again. Five, four, three, two, one, zero.”

“Crucio”, Snape shouted. Again Harry’s shield went up, and again there was no damage. Again Harry felt as though something was changing in the air just before the spell was cast, but he wondered whether he was imagining it. The students cheered again. To Harry’s surprise, Professor Snape walked up to him and offered his hand; Harry shook it, wondering if this was part of a ritual involved with such demonstrations. Dumbledore shook his hand too, then McGonagall. Dumbledore addressed the crowd.

“Thank you for your attention. Mr. Brantell would like to ask Harry a few questions now, and I thought there might be some interest in this, so I have arranged for the audio to be enhanced. Hugo?”

Hugo walked up to where Harry was standing. “Harry, may I ask you a few questions?”

“Depends, do they have anything to do with girlfriends?”

Hugo smiled as the crowd laughed. “Don’t tempt me, Harry. First of all, can you describe how this spell came to you?”

“I wish I could, Hugo. It was just there, that’s really the best way to say it. It was as if I just got this idea, fully formed, and did what it felt like I should do.”

“Can you say exactly what you did? How would you describe the process of casting the spell?”

“When the idea first came to me, I imagined a shield that totally surrounded me. I imagined it looking bright, and made out of the energy of love, which is probably the most unusual thing about it.”

The audience murmured a bit, suggesting that they thought it was strange. Hugo asked, “What made you think of doing that, Harry?”

Harry took a deep breath. He was less than thrilled to explain the details publicly, but had already decided, with some encouragement from Hermione, that the spell was too important not to make the information about it public. “This goes back to my whole approach to dealing with Voldemort. The second time I met him, last June in the Ministry of Magic, he tried to possess me, to put his... spirit, I guess, into my body and control it. It was horrible, like being lost in a sea of evil. After a few seconds, I felt like death would be better than existing like that. Thinking of that made me think of... people I loved who had died, that I would be with them, and that made me feel love. As soon as that happened, Voldemort retreated, he left my body, and I was myself again. Later, Professor Dumbledore explained that Voldemort left my body because he can't tolerate the presence of love. His... maybe essence is a better word... is one of pure evil. It can't tolerate being around love, because love reminds it of how empty and barren it is. So Professor Dumbledore told me that this was my best defense against Voldemort, to avoid being taken over, to try to stop dreams and other intrusions.

“So, even before the dreams started, I was trying to do mental exercises, to be able to summon up feelings of love, to focus on them. It wasn't easy; I was raised in a home where love wasn't expressed, so it wasn't familiar to me. I wasn't comfortable with it. But, it's amazing how the possibility of having to deal with Voldemort is a great motivator. I put a lot of effort into working it through, to being more comfortable with it. Ginny and Hermione were a great help,” he said, looking at them. “I guess this is easier for girls. Ron, on the other hand, was no help at all.” The crowd laughed, as did Ron. “But most helpful of all was Professor Dumbledore, which won't surprise anyone who's spent any time around him. Both

his example and his advice helped me. So, when the dreams started, I knew what I had to do. During the dreams, I focused as hard as I could on feelings of love, of being calm. I knew it was the only way to get through what I had to go through.

“Now... and I’m just now getting to the answer to your question, Hugo... in the dreams, I was constantly focusing on love, trying to create an atmosphere that he wouldn’t like. He tried to possess me again in the first dream, but doing deliberately what I did accidentally at the Ministry of Magic, I was able to push him out. I couldn’t push him out of my dreams quite so easily, but I knew eventually I could do it. The hard part was withstanding the Curse every night. So, when I had the inspiration for the shield on the fourth night, it was already second nature to be focusing on love, so it seemed totally natural to me to have the shield energy be composed of love, which I had come to think of as a source of energy, something real. It had driven Voldemort out of my mind; it seemed real to me. So that was what I did. It wasn’t something I planned. It was as if my mind knew what it should do without me thinking about it.”

A hush had fallen over the crowd. Hugo said, “Harry, that was probably the most personal thing anyone’s ever said to me in front of three hundred people.” The crowd chuckled. “Why did you go into so much detail about this? Love isn’t something that most people talk about like this.”

Harry smiled. “First of all, Hugo, the Hogwarts community is very sensitive and understanding. I’m sure no one will be teasing me about this at all.” This got a big laugh. Hugo interrupted to say, “Yes, and I’m sure that someone who’s come to understand and focus on love will not be of any particular interest to the girls at Hogwarts.” The crowd again laughed.

“See, it’s already started,” Harry said. “But to answer your question, there are two reasons. First, it’s not going to make any sense to say I focused on love unless I explain the background, why it was necessary to do that. Secondly, this is important for people to know, much more important than any embarrassment I might feel in talking about it. I now realize what a powerful weapon love is, and if

anyone doesn't believe it, all they have to do is look at the shield. The Cruciatus Curse was thought to be unblockable, but love is so powerful that it could do it. It could cause Voldemort to retreat. Who knows what else it might do? People have to know."

"Has this focus had any effect on you in your day-to-day life?"

"I've been around you long enough, Hugo, to know that you already know the answer, you just want me to say what it is." Hugo nodded, and Harry chuckled. "Yes, it's had a great side benefit. I feel more relaxed, calmer, less easily agitated than before. Last year I was on edge a lot, testing the patience of my friends," he said, looking at Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. "I felt a lot better this year, before the attacks, and I'm sure it was because of that that once the attacks started, I was able to get through them without despairing. It was a really difficult situation."

"Another of your famous understatements, Harry, but never mind. So you feel this focus has made you a happier person?"

"Yes, I definitely think so. I had no idea that it would, I had no idea about love, to be honest. I just worked as hard as I could to follow Professor Dumbledore's advice, and this was the result. I'm very grateful to him." He looked at Dumbledore, who smiled back at him.

"Harry, I talked to some people in the scientific community today, and they said that if tonight's test proved successful, it would be the most important new spell in three hundred years. How does that make you feel, being the one who discovered it?"

"I guess 'pleased and amazed' would describe it. I feel like you expect me to say 'proud,' but since it came to me without my thinking about it, I don't feel like it's 'mine,' but just something I found, that I was very lucky to have found."

Hugo shook his head. "Harry, you've made me take off my reporter's hat for a moment. Your accomplishment was partly in finding the spell, but mostly in managing to survive the situation with your spirit intact. For four nights you had no

defense against the Curse, but you didn't back down. Most people would have never gotten that far, far enough to find the spell in the first place."

Harry started to answer, but was drowned out by a quickly building wave of applause. Harry smiled with embarrassment as he saw that the teachers had joined in. "Thank you," he said when the applause faded. "But I can't say it enough, and I'll say it again: Professor Dumbledore, my friends, Fawkes, the teachers, and all of you... helped me keep my spirits up. I benefited from your help more than you can probably understand. I knew I wasn't alone. It helped me focus, and I'm grateful to everyone."

"Thank you, Harry," said Hugo, indicating that the interview was over. The crowd applauded one more time. Harry stepped down and headed toward the Gryffindor table. He reflected again on how lucky he was, despite all he had to go through, as he was patted and congratulated by his friends.

Harry got a good night's uninterrupted sleep that night. Dean and Seamus moved back into the dormitory; Fawkes sang again as a precaution, and Harry knew that Fawkes would retrieve Dumbledore if it was necessary. But he knew it wouldn't be, and it wasn't. At breakfast, Hermione told him that she was ready with the communications arrangements he'd asked for, and that she'd managed to find Pansy alone to tell her to meet Harry at 4:00. Harry found one of his Slytherin first years and told them to meet him at 4:15 and to keep it quiet.

He took his Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map with him to his afternoon Charms class, so he could go directly to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. He arrived at a few minutes before four to find Pansy already there. Ron and Hermione had come with him, and they stayed in the outer room to stand lookout as Harry and Pansy retreated to the office.

"How are you doing, Pansy?"

"Oh, Harry... watching the demonstration last night, the images yesterday morning... do you have any idea how hard it was for me to keep my feelings off my

face? To pretend I felt like Malfoy did? When I was so amazed and proud of you that I could burst? And what you said about love yesterday, it was just... inspirational. It was beautiful.”

“Thank you, Pansy. I’m really glad you feel that way. But now that this is over, you should be able to keep your true face hidden better.”

She nodded. “I’m just so glad for your sake it is over. I was so happy to hear it yesterday, I almost cheered along with everyone else. You should have seen Malfoy when Dumbledore showed those images. He was so scared when he saw the Dark Lord, I thought he was going to wet himself.” Harry laughed. “I shouldn’t talk, though, I was pretty scared myself. But I don’t pretend otherwise. And when you used your spell, in the dream, and told him that he’d lost, Malfoy was so stunned, it was funny to watch. He just couldn’t believe it.”

“Poor Malfoy, his hero defeated. So what’s it like in Slytherin these days?”

“Malfoy’s keeping a very low profile. What you accomplished has caused most Slytherins, even maybe half the older ones, to abandon the pretense that they agree with Malfoy about you. They say things like, ‘I don’t care for Potter personally, but what he did was pretty amazing,’ that sort of thing. The younger ones are really open in their support, talking about it in the common room. Malfoy’s been spending a lot of time in his dormitory, which I’m really pleased with, since I can’t go in there. It’s safe to say that nobody has to fear saying nice things about you, which is great.”

“I’m really glad, Pansy. That was all I wanted in the first place. By the way, the first years will be here in a few minutes. You have to understand that they may be reluctant to believe that you’re with them. They’ve seen only the opposite from you.”

She nodded. “I know that, I’m ready to try to convince them.”

Hermione came in. “Harry, they’re all here.”

“Okay, thanks. Pansy, you stay here, I want to talk to them for a minute first. Come out when you hear me ask for you. Ron’ll warn you if someone’s coming;

grab the Cloak out of the bag if you need to. I'll ask for you in a minute." She nodded again, and he walked out into the classroom.

He could tell that the Slytherin first years were excited to see him. He smiled and sat down near where they were standing. They spent a few minutes giving him their reactions to his recent actions, after which Harry got down to business.

"The reason I asked you here is that there's someone who wants to help me, to help us. She has been doing it for a few days now, and her help could be very important. You're going to be surprised when you see who it is, but I ask you to listen to what she has to say." He walked to the office and gestured for Pansy to come out. As she did, there was a gasp from the Slytherins; Harry could tell this was not something they were happy about, at least at first. Harry put his arm around Pansy's shoulders for a moment as a kind of silent endorsement, and they sat down next to each other, in front of the first years.

"But she's Malfoy's friend!" Augustina Delva almost shouted. "She's always with him, laughing and stuff."

"Think about it, Augustina," said Hedrick. "If she's a spy, she has to act like that, doesn't she?"

Harry nodded. "That's right, Hedrick. She came to me on Saturday, after Nott tried to kill me. She told me she wanted to help, that she was sick of Malfoy and wanted to do something better. I didn't know whether to believe her at first. She hadn't been very nice to us for five years." Pansy smiled, embarrassed, at his understatement. "But I've talked to her a lot since then, for a few hours over the past few days. I can see what kind of person she is, how she wants to be better than she was. I trust her. I believe her."

Pansy turned to face the first years. "I know it may be hard for you to believe me like Harry does. You've only seen the worst part of me, saying nice things about Malfoy, laughing with him, acting stupid. But when I'm with Harry, I can be who I want to be. He's been very kind. I've been very angry with myself for things I've done, for how I've been. I've cried on his shoulder, I mean actually, and

he's been forgiving and understanding. He's been wonderful, and I'm grateful to him."

The first years looked entranced; they'd probably never seen anyone open up like this. Even Ron and Hermione looked impressed. "I want to keep pretending to be Malfoy's friend. I mean, I don't really want to, I hate him now. I've been so stupid to have been his friend before. But I want to keep pretending because I might find out something that could help Harry. He was almost killed on Saturday. I want to stop that from happening again. If I'd known Nott was a Death Eater, I could have told Harry, for example. I can find out things you can't, and I can understand small things that you might not, because I've been here so long. If you want, you can help me help him."

Harry spoke again. "You have to decide whether to help her. I have no authority over you, I can't tell you to do anything. You help me because you want to, and I'm very grateful for that. All I can tell you is that I trust her. You also need to understand that she's taking a risk, a big risk. You support me openly, all the Slytherins know it. Pansy tells me that no one's bothering you for it any more, and they probably won't in the future. But what she's doing is very dangerous. If anybody finds out what she's doing... it's not impossible that she could be killed. It probably wouldn't happen, but you need to understand how important this is. Whether you help her or not, it's very important that you not say anything to anybody about this. She could be in real danger."

The Slytherins looked somber. "If we helped her," asked Helen, "what would we be doing?"

"Not that much, really," Harry answered. "Most of the time there wouldn't be so much you could do. It's mainly that you could tell her about things you noticed, things you heard, things that seem strange. She's in a better position to understand such things than me, or even you. It could help her find out about another Death Eater, help her protect me."

“All I want,” Pansy said earnestly to the Slytherins, “is to keep him safe. What he’s doing is so important. I’m so glad he doesn’t have to worry about the Curse anymore, but he’s still in danger.”

There was silence, then Hedrick asked, “Is it okay if we talk about this for a minute?” Harry nodded, and led Pansy away to the other end of the classroom as the Slytherins huddled. “It’s a little democracy they’ve got there,” Harry said, smiling.

“Harry, thank you for everything you said, for everything you’ve done. Thank you for trusting me.”

Harry smiled and shrugged a bit, not knowing how to respond. “Well, you opened up to me, that probably did it as much as anything else. By the way, tonight’s formal demonstration of the new spell is closed, the whole school can’t watch, and I’m only allowed to invite some friends and family. But I’ve asked Dumbledore to request that the prefects be there as well, so you can come and it won’t look suspicious.”

She smiled gratefully. “Thanks, I appreciate it.” They talked for another minute. The Slytherins separated, indicating that they were done talking. Harry and Pansy walked over to them.

“We’ve decided that...” Looking at Pansy, Helen said, “We don’t really know you, so we don’t know that we can trust you, for ourselves. But we trust him. He risks his life for us, for all wizards and witches everywhere. And he trusts you.” Turning to Harry, she continued, “So, if you trust her, then we trust her, because we trust you.”

“Thank you,” said Harry and Pansy at the same time. Some of the Slytherins giggled. “Now, I need to say this again, and I’m very serious,” Harry said. They nodded attentively. “It’s very important that you tell no one about this. No matter how close friends you are with them, no matter how much you trust them, you can’t tell them. They don’t need to know, and it could put Pansy in danger. You shouldn’t even talk about it among yourselves anywhere except your dormitories in

case you're overheard. Don't use her name, don't say things that could help someone figure it out. Now, you might be thinking, of course, we know that, we're not stupid. I trust you, and I know you're smart. But I'm saying all this because of how important it is. I hope you understand that."

"We understand, sir," said David. "We won't let you down, or her." The others confirmed this with their eyes and nods.

"Okay," said Harry. "Now, I've asked Hermione to work out some way so that we can signal each other if we need to. Last year, with the D.A., we had fake Galleons that she had charmed to communicate meeting times. So, what have you come up with this time, Hermione?"

"Well, I decided to use Galleons again, for the same reason—it's not so suspicious to have one in your pocket. You just have to be sure not to try to spend it accidentally. Here, I'll give them to you now, and you can look at them while I explain how they work." She handed them out to everyone; each one had a small paper on it with the recipient's name. The first years looked impressed.

"First of all, each Galleon lights up in certain situations, and the area of the light shows which person it is. Imagine that each Galleon is like a slice of a pie with twelve pieces, or think of it like a clock. The first piece represents Harry, that is, from 12:00 to 1:00. From 1:00 to 6:00 are the boys, in alphabetical order. Then Pansy is from 6:00 to 7:00, and the girls are the rest. So, the right side is boys and the left side is girls, that's easy to remember.

"Now, you can signal each other using these. Here's one way of doing it: you just squeeze the center of the coin. I'll do it with Harry's." She squeezed, and on all the other coins, Harry's slice of the pie started blinking and vibrating. Everyone let out a gasp of appreciation, even Pansy. "So if you see that, you know Harry's signaling you. It's vibrating so you'll feel it in your pocket. My idea is that this is a distress or emergency signal; the blinking means that it's being sent to all the other coins. If it's just a general signal, nothing urgent, you do it differently. You find the right spot on the coin and you press the edge. Let's say Harry wants to

meet Pansy. Harry presses the edge at Pansy's area." She did so, and Pansy's coin vibrated and lit up at Harry's area, not blinking. "So, if Pansy sees this, she knows Harry wants to talk to her. Also, Harry's and Pansy's can exchange basic information, like a time to meet. I didn't do that with the rest because you don't need it, and it's better to keep it simple. Any questions?"

Pansy and the Slytherins had dazed looks. "This is simple?" asked a girl named Sylvia.

"Now, this is how Harry and I feel all the time," Ron said, grinning.

"It'll be fine once you get used to it," Hermione said, ignoring Ron. "For you first years, it'll be mainly to signal Pansy that you want to talk to her. You don't need to signal Harry, since you can meet openly with him if you want. You don't really need to signal each other, of course. I would also advise you not to use it unless it's necessary, since whoever you signal can't look at it if there are people around."

"Is this what you do all that time you're in the library?" asked Pansy, amazed.

"No, but that's part of the reason I can do this," Hermione replied.

"Excuse me, but could you tell us this again, please?" asked a boy. Everyone laughed, and Hermione took him through it again. They practiced a bit, got another talk from Harry about security and what to do if they lost it, and they left. Pansy stayed back to talk to Harry, and to have Hermione explain how they could send each other times to meet with their coins. Pansy thanked Hermione warmly, said goodbye to Harry, and she left.

As Pansy walked away, Ron and Hermione walked up to Harry. "So, what do you think, Hermione?" asked Ron. "You're better at this sort of thing than I am."

"What sort of thing?" Harry asked.

"Ron was asking me at lunch whether I thought Pansy might be falling for you."

Harry rolled his eyes, but Ron looked serious. “What, you think it’s impossible?” asked Ron.

“I think Ron has a reasonable point, Harry. Just the situation practically begs for it to happen. Think about it. You’re the only person in her life with whom she can, as she said, be the person she wants to be. Being with you once a week is going to be the highlight of her week. You’ll be happy to do it and enjoy it, but not like her; she’ll look forward to it all week. It would almost be amazing if she didn’t transfer some of that excitement onto you. And then there’s you; look at how you’re regarded around the school right now. Sure, that’ll fade somewhat, but it’s still there. And that you’re a nice, kind, sympathetic person—and you do like her, I can tell. She can tell, too. Her eyes just lit up every time she looked at you. I’m not saying she’s in love with you, not right now. But she’s got a hard year ahead of her as long as she’s under cover, and you’re the only bright spot in it. It’s not hard to see it coming.”

Harry was frustrated. “What do you think I should do, then? Stop meeting her? Stop being nice to her? Stop liking her? I couldn’t do that to her!”

“Calm down, Harry,” Ron said. Unable to keep a small smile off his face, he added, “Focus on love.”

“Very funny,” Harry said, annoyed. Ron looked upset that his joke hadn’t worked.

“Harry, I’m not criticizing you, and of course you shouldn’t stop doing what you’re doing,” said Hermione earnestly. “I’m not sure that there’s anything you can do. Maybe it’s not nice of Ron and I to speculate on it, as if her feelings didn’t matter. They do. But you should be aware of the possibility.”

“She’s aware of the possibility! She said on Sunday that it wasn’t me that she was keen on, so much as what I represent. It seems at least possible that she could keep them separate.”

“Well, I hope you’re right, Harry, I really do. Maybe we shouldn’t have brought it up, there’s nothing you can do anyway. Let’s go back to Gryffindor Tower, and we can help you go through the mail from the article.”

They headed back to Gryffindor tower, and Harry calmed down. They spent an hour and a half reading through the mail, which was mostly supportive, and included two dozen requests for autographs. Hermione offered to go get him some parchment for that purpose.

“I’m not going to sit here signing autographs!” Harry almost shouted at her. She and Ron both looked at him, concerned. He exhaled. “I’m sorry... I don’t know, maybe I’m concerned about what you said about Pansy. I hope it doesn’t happen. I’d hate to cause her that kind of pain if it did.”

“I know, Harry,” Hermione said soothingly. She cast an accusatory glance at Ron, who didn’t happen to be looking in her direction. Harry realized that she blamed him for bringing it up, since now it just worried Harry, and there was nothing he could do. “You should go on just as you have, be a friend to her. She needs one, badly. It’s the only thing to do. Who knows what’ll happen. If it happens, just help her out as best you can.”

Harry reluctantly realized that she was right, and went back to reading the mail. He made Hermione happy by signing the autographs after all.

The Great Hall was cleared after dinner and the long tables moved, so there would be clear space in the middle of the room. Harry was up near the teachers’ table talking to Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Luna, Cho, and Justin. He was allowed to invite ten guests, and had chosen Justin to express his gratitude for Justin’s support. Being a prefect, Ernie needed no invitation. The other five guests were Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Fred and George, and Remus Lupin, all of whom walked into the Hall together and approached Harry.

Harry got a very enthusiastic hug from Mrs. Weasley, and handshakes from the four men. Lupin said, “Thanks for your letter, Harry. I was going to write back, but then this happened, and I was able just to come here. But I appreciated that you took the time during a crisis like that to write to me.”

While Lupin was speaking, Harry noticed that the Slytherin prefects had come in, and Pansy was near enough to hear him talking to Lupin. He said to Lupin, "It was helpful to do it. So, how about the amusement park?"

Lupin smiled. "I have the whole day blocked out on my calendar."

Standing nearby, Fred said, "I have to say, I still feel a bit woozy."

"About what, Fred?" Harry wondered.

George answered, "Just before we came in here, Dumbledore showed us the images he showed the school yesterday morning. Looking at... Voldemort isn't my idea of a fun thing to do."

"Five points for Gryffindor, George," said Harry. Everyone nearby laughed.

"We couldn't believe it, Harry," agreed Fred. "The way you just took it to him, even though you'd been Cursed four nights in a row, as if you didn't have a care in the world. I know Hermione says you're a bit thick, but no one's that thick."

"I don't say that!" Hermione said, indignantly.

"That's right," Harry said. "Ron's the one who says I'm thick. Hermione's just the one who makes me look thick."

"Ah, how much we've forgotten, so quickly," lamented Fred.

"Tis the nature of schooling," agreed George.

"I sincerely hope not, gentlemen, or I have not been doing my job," said Dumbledore, who was just walking by.

"Hello, Professor," said George. "It was great of you to come by the shop."

"Yes," added Fred, "We should get a photo of you and Harry, put up the title, 'Our two most prominent customers.'"

"Harry, they are ready for you," said Dumbledore, gesturing Harry to where he should stand. Harry said goodbye to his friends and walked to where Dumbledore had indicated.

As the senior Auror present, Kingsley Shacklebolt made the opening announcement. "Tonight we are here to observe a new spell, which as yet has no name, discovered by Professor Harry Potter, instructor of Defense Against the

Dark Arts at Hogwarts. Professor Potter, each of the three Aurors will discharge the Cruciatus Curse at you two times. For the third round, you may request to attempt variations as you choose. Do you have any questions?”

“No,” Harry responded.

“Very well, Professor. We will begin when you are ready.”

Harry looked at the assembled faces. Most of the people he felt close to were in the room, watching him, silently cheering him on, proud of him. He smiled and took it all in. They brought me through this, Harry thought. He felt their love, their caring. He basked in it, then turned.

“I’m ready.”

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POTTER DEMONSTRATES ANTI-CRUCIATUS SPELL AT HOGWARTS ***Aurors Stunned At Effectiveness of As-Yet-Unnamed Spell***

(Hogwarts) Hugo Brantell, Daily Prophet

A week of stunning developments in Hogwarts Professor Harry Potter’s crusade to name He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named ended in spectacular fashion today, as Professor Potter successfully unveiled his new spell to veteran Aurors and representatives of the magical scientific community.

As reported here yesterday, the spell was developed extemporaneously by Professor Potter during the fourth night of an ordeal in which He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named invaded Professor Potter’s dreams each night, insisted that Professor Potter cease his crusade, and used the dreaded Cruciatus Curse, with full effectiveness, on Professor Potter when each night he refused to do so

Senior Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt led the team of Aurors who cast the Curse and measured the effectiveness of the spell used to block it. “His spell blocked the Curse with 100% effectiveness,” said Shacklebolt. “If I hadn’t just seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it.”

The other Aurors were equally impressed. “His shield quite overwhelms the Curse,” reported Auror Hubert Dawlish. “In addition, it fully surrounds him, so there is no place for the Curse to get through. Most new spells have required lengthy periods of refinement, but this one appears to be fully formed and perfect.”

The three Aurors sent the Curse at Professor Potter twice each in the initial two rounds of testing. In the third round, in which the one presenting the spell may attempt variations on it, Professor Potter made requests which moved those close to him to fear for his safety. The first variation he requested was that the spell be done silently rather than on a countdown, so that he would have as little time as possible to prepare. Doing so, he blocked the spell.

The second variation Professor Potter requested was that he be blindfolded, then the Curse sent at him silently. His close friends, in attendance, strongly objected to this idea and attempted to dissuade him. He firmly overcame their objections, assuring them with complete confidence—which this reporter’s empathic abilities confirmed—that he would suffer no harm. The doubtful Aurors acceded to his request and blindfolded him thoroughly, then cast the spell silently after a wait of longer than a minute, so that Professor Potter would be less likely to anticipate the Curse purely by chance. To the Aurors’ amazement, Professor Potter successfully blocked this Curse as well, his shield coming on while the Curse was en route.

Professor Potter then requested that three Curses be sent at him simultaneously, on a countdown, from three different directions. The Aurors, however, refused his request, and no amount of arguing on his part would move them. “If the Curse were something less dangerous, we would have accommodated him,” said Shackbolt, obviously in awe of the risks Professor Potter wished to take. “And frankly, the shield was so powerful that it might well have stopped all three. I would guess that it would have. But we didn’t know for sure, and I didn’t want to think about the effect of three simultaneous Curses on anyone.”

A disappointed Professor Potter then chose as his third variation to be subjected to the Curse from behind, with no warning, the spell cast silently. This Curse was blocked by the shield as well.

How, Professor Potter was asked, could he have cast a defense against spells he could not have known were coming? “It was something I started to notice in the later dreams,” he explained. “There was a different... feeling in the air just before V----- cast the Curse.

I'm sorry, but I can't explain it any better than that. I also noticed it in yesterday's preliminary test, so I was confident that I would be able to anticipate the Curse. Obviously I was right. I'd much rather find this out now than find out the hard way against V----- or his Death Eaters." The professor's tone and manner, while inwardly and outwardly relaxed, conveyed his firm belief that such a confrontation must inevitably occur.

As reported yesterday, a unique feature of this spell is that it is to be cast while the caster is strongly focusing on the emotion of love, and that the shield is to be formed of the energy of love. The scientific community has asserted that there is no scientifically verifiable such thing as 'the energy of love,' but Professor Potter insists, with unshakable certainty, that that is what he summoned, and that is what it is.

Unfortunately, part of what makes the spell so remarkable—that it can stop the Cruciatus Curse—also inhibits testing and research; the price of failing to stop a spell is so high that few will be willing to experiment. Professor Potter has offered to be a subject for whatever experiments the scientific community may find desirable; the community is now weighing his offer.

Meanwhile, Professor Potter has accepted Mr. Shacklebolt's invitation to visit the Ministry this weekend to give a presentation on his spell to the full complement of Aurors. "I'd say that people will want to come in on their day off to hear what he has to say," said Shacklebolt confidently.

(Related story on page 9.)

CHAPTER 14

STAR OF THE MATCH

POTTER'S CAMPAIGN TO USE DARK LORD'S NAME SLOWLY GATHERS SUPPORT

More and More People Willing To Say the Dreaded Name, V—

(London) Hugo Brantell, Daily Prophet

Seven weeks after Hogwarts Professor Harry Potter faced down He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named (hereafter referred to as V-----) in a series of nighttime mental attacks, more and more people say they are beginning to see—and act on—Professor Potter's simple question: How can we fight him if we're too afraid to even say his name?

An unscientific survey of attitudes in the wizarding world suggests that support for Professor Potter's point of view is growing. People are still afraid, it seems, but more are fighting their fears and saying the name, or sympathize, and hope to reach a point where they can say it in the future. Many still resist the notion, of course, but what support does exist is remarkable considering what attitudes were two months ago.

Unsurprisingly, Hogwarts has become the center of this support. Most Hogwarts students now not only say the name, but do it unselfconsciously, with little or no fear. Typical of students' attitudes is a first year boy who said, "Professor Potter taught us that it's just a name, so there's no reason to be scared. I mean, I'm still scared of V-----, just not his name." A third year girl agreed, saying, "Once you get used to saying his name, it's not so bad. You realize it's just a word. It would be like not saying the word 'fire' because you're afraid of fire."

Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore, widely reputed to be the only living wizard feared by V-----, was Professor Potter's inspiration for his crusade, and strongly supports it. "I have been saying his name, and encouraging others to do so, for more than a decade, with very limited results. Professor Potter, however, has managed to do much more in a

short time. I am very proud of what he has accomplished, and will continue to do my utmost to support him.”

Among those who have become willing to say the name, Professor Potter’s struggle with V----- is widely cited as their inspiration to do so. Readers will recall that in early September, in response to Professor Potter’s crusade, V----- invaded Professor Potter’s mind at night, aided by a highly unusual telepathic link created by the curse scar, and subjected Professor Potter to the Cruciatu s Curse for four nights in a row, until Professor Potter defeated V-----’s intentions by developing a shield to block the Curse. Professor Potter’s willingness to face the Curse, and V-----, undefended for four nights while refusing to stop saying the name was widely considered one of the greatest acts of personal bravery known to have occurred in recent years.

“He did it for us,” said Tillie Malten, a middle-aged London witch. “He suffered that so we could say V-----’s name. He led by example. The only way we can honor what he’s done is to say the name ourselves.”

In agreement was Amos Diggory, whose son Cedric was the first killed by V----- upon his return from near-death. “Cedric always liked and respected Harry, and I’m sure he would support what Harry is doing. All I know is, V----- will kill you whether you say his name or not, so why not say it?”

Most people who are not in agreement with Professor Potter do not necessarily oppose what he is doing, but rather, think it to be tempting fate and imprudent. “With respect to Harry, he wasn’t around when You-Know-Who was strong before, killing people right and left. He has no personal experience of the terror that caused. Those of us who do, feel we have good reason not to say the name,” says Tibor Lowton, a Hogsmeade retiree. What, he was asked, of Professor Potter’s argument that one cannot fight V----- if one cannot say his name? “Honestly, I can’t speak to that. I see the point, I understand he has to be fought. I just don’t think I can say the name, and don’t blame anyone who can’t.”

The Ministry of Magic is not taking an official position on this matter. “How people wish to refer to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is a matter for people to decide individually, and the Ministry should not attempt to dictate such things, one way or the other,” said an unnamed Ministry spokesperson in a statement. Sources inside the Ministry say the Ministry leadership is edging cautiously in Professor Potter’s direction, but is unwilling to take a clear stand as yet for fear of possible political backlash. “[The Ministry leadership] have licked their finger and stuck

it in the air, and now they're waiting for some wind," said a disgusted Ministry source who supports Professor Potter. The source then shrugged resignedly. "But then, since when were bureaucrats ever known for bravery? Thank goodness we have Harry. Where he leads, people will eventually follow, and the bureaucrats will be dragged along."

* * * * *

The next several weeks were among the most gratifying Harry had ever spent at Hogwarts. He enjoyed his teaching duties; as others had told him would happen, the students' awe had worn off, but he knew he had their complete respect and admiration, and they took everything he said very seriously. Not only did no one skive off again, but he was forced to send two obviously sick students, who had attended his class anyway, to Madam Pomfrey. The students considered their time with him the high point of their week.

As Hermione had predicted, so did Pansy Parkinson. Harry continued to meet with her every week, occasionally twice. She had observed Malfoy's schedule and found times during which her absence would not arouse suspicion, and they usually met during those times. He found his affection for her becoming close to what he felt for his other friends, but her obvious enthusiasm for meeting him and affection for him caused him to remember what Ron and Hermione had said about the possibility of her falling in love with him. He still didn't think it would happen, largely because a part of him still refused to acknowledge that he was worthy of someone falling in love with him, but it concerned him anyway.

Harry's presentation to the Aurors had gone well; they were spellbound by his talk, and they pelted him with questions for two hours after he finished. They were very eager to be able to learn the spell, and he told them as much as he could. With Dumbledore's assistance, Harry showed them all five of the dreams, so they would better understand what had happened, and talked about his thoughts and

emotional state between each one. They were gratified that he wanted to become one of them, and expressed confidence that he would manage it. In the weeks since, he had kept in communication with some of them. Even so, the only person so far who had learned the spell was Dumbledore, who learned it quickly enough to demonstrate it to the Aurors along with Harry.

Harry had made an unusual request of Dumbledore; with studying Occlumency now not so urgent, and with Dumbledore confident that his skill was sufficient to deal with any problems, he asked for private lessons of a different sort. He explained that he wanted to learn the sort of spells that Aurors knew, the sort that he had seen Dumbledore use against Voldemort. "I know I'm going to be facing him again," Harry had said, "and I want to be able to deal with him, and his Death Eaters. I think I can learn whatever you can teach me." Dumbledore agreed, and allowed Ron, Ginny, and Hermione to join as well, partly so Harry would have someone to partner with. Only Hermione, however, was able to keep up with Harry learning the new spells. Ginny joked that this group should truly be called 'Dumbledore's Army.'

As Dumbledore had predicted, after Harry's ordeal with Voldemort was over, Fawkes spent less time with Harry, perhaps a third of each day or less. Unlike Dumbledore, who was in his office every day, Harry moved around the school a lot, so it was difficult for Fawkes to be with him too much without constantly staying on Harry's shoulder as he had while the dreams persisted. Fawkes showed up most often as Harry was going to sleep or waking up, studying in the common room, and while Harry taught.

He spent much of his time with Ron and Hermione, as usual, but they were all busy. Harry had to work hard to keep up with his studies, as he had teaching and Quidditch practice responsibilities. Ron spent hours in the common room and dormitory working out Quidditch strategies, and watched a lot of Omni-view to get ideas. Their first match was against Slytherin, and while Harry had stopped thinking of the whole of Slytherin house as an enemy, he was still highly motivated to beat

Malfoy, as was Ron. Hermione was working hard to keep up with ten classes, and she mentioned meeting Ernie a few times, but Harry didn't pay much attention; he assumed they were still working out how to re-take the Astronomy O.W.L. exam.

Harry was relaxing in the staff room on a Thursday afternoon in the last week of October when a familiar golden dog jumped onto his lap and pawed at him. Harry got up and followed it to Dumbledore's office.

"Yes, Harry, thank you for coming," said Dumbledore. "I wished to confirm your plans this weekend. Will you be going into Hogsmeade both days?"

"Yes, sir, I think so. Why?"

"I am concerned about security. It is not inconceivable that Voldemort may order Death Eaters to mount an attack on Hogsmeade. They know they cannot touch the school itself, so Hogsmeade full of students is the next logical target."

"Is that something they're really going to do? What can they accomplish?"

"The point of the attack would be terror, Harry. If the school were less secure they would have attacked it already. Your defeat of Voldemort was as damaging to him as it was uplifting to the wizarding community, and he will want an opportunity to strike back. We have no specific intelligence which points to such an attack; it is all speculation. We considered canceling Hogsmeade weekend, but we realized that there could then be no Hogsmeade weekends at all until Voldemort is defeated, and we are not willing to pay such a price."

"Of course not, sir. We have to be careful, but do what we would otherwise do."

"Does that mean, Harry, that you have changed your mind about the idea of a romantic attachment?"

Harry felt like rolling his eyes, but didn't feel it was right to do that with Dumbledore. "A lot of people have mentioned this to me, but only you and Hermione have made that particular argument. It's annoying, because it's true."

"And?" Dumbledore prompted him.

Harry sighed. “For now, I just avoid the question, because there’s nobody I’m especially interested in at the moment. If I fall in love, I’ll have to deal with it. It’s just hard to see why I should go out of my way to find someone now. And I know there are plenty of girls who’d go out with me, but that just seems like tempting fate.”

“I don’t mean to intrude, of course, Harry—“

”Of course you’re not intruding, sir. There’s nothing I wouldn’t talk to you about.”

“Thank you, Harry, I appreciate that.”

Harry thought a moment. “Sir, there’s something I’ve been meaning to mention to you, but never have.” He described the situation with Pansy Parkinson, and Hermione’s warning from last month. “Is there anything I can do?”

Dumbledore considered. “Do you think it impossible that you might return her affection in the same way, if that turned out to be the case?”

“No, she’s very nice, and I feel a strong attachment to her, but in a similar way that I do with Hermione and Ginny. My stomach doesn’t do backflips like it did with Cho.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Such symptoms are not the only way we know if we are attracted to someone. It can come upon you suddenly. But you would not rule her out as a possibility because of her past association with Mr. Malfoy?”

Harry was surprised that he would ask. “Of course not, sir.”

“Then, I would say you could not know how you might feel. But even if you were sure you would not fall in love with her, I would say that you should do nothing differently than what you are doing. You are simply being yourself, and you cannot fault yourself for that. You say she knows this risk, so it is up to her now. She may fall in love with you and find her heart broken. But it would not be your fault; it is a part of life. There is only so much you can do to protect those you care about from pain. They have their own lives to live, their own choices to make. All you can do is be the best person you can be.”

“I understand, sir.” Harry wasn’t happy about it, but he understood. “Anyway, I’ll probably go to the Three Broomsticks after the Quidditch is over, then do some errands on Sunday. I’ll be with Ron, Hermione, and Neville.”

“I see that Neville is being slowly integrated into your group.”

Harry nodded. “He’s a really nice person, he’s just always been so shy. It was just starting last year when he got more... approachable, I guess. Anyway, if something does happen, it’ll be good to have him around.”

“Speaking of which, Harry... if something does happen, and the village should fall under attack, I trust you and your friends will immediately head back to the castle?”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Sir, it’s not like you to make such an obvious joke.”

“But I wish you to be safe and unhurt, Harry. Just as you wish Pansy to be safe and unhurt, emotionally. But you have no choice but to follow the dictates of your heart, to help those who need it. Neither does she. You know the risks; so does she. I could confine you to Hogwarts to ensure your safety. You could deliberately be with Pansy someone other than who you are.”

Harry reluctantly nodded. “Of course you’re right, sir.”

“Again, Harry, we have no particular reason to think that anything will happen, but there will be a higher-than-usual level of security in Hogsmeade.”

“Thank you, sir. We’ll keep our eyes open.” Harry said goodbye and left.

Harry had a meeting with Pansy later that afternoon, and in a fit of openness, decided to relate what he’d talked about with Dumbledore. “Really, I’m not even sure why I’m telling you this,” he finished. “I think it just makes me look stupid, or egotistical, like, wow, I’m the great Harry Potter, how could any girl possibly resist—“

Pansy cut him off with a gesture, and with laughter. “I’m sorry, Harry, I’m not laughing at you, like you’re stupid... when you use the word ‘egotistical,’ I couldn’t help but think that your ego is very small, especially compared with your

accomplishments. You may be the least egotistical person I know. I would never think that.”

She paused for a moment before continuing. “It was good of you to tell me that. I care about you and I want to know if something’s bothering you, especially if it has to do with me.” She looked at him earnestly. “Look, it could happen. Hermione’s right, the situation would make it easy. The only part of my world that I really like is you. But Dumbledore’s also right. I chose to do this, I accepted whatever risks there were. I wasn’t thinking of the risk that I would fall in love with you, but the emotional problem of having no one to talk to but you.

“It’s typically sweet of you to be concerned,” she continued, smiling. “And I can’t say I really know what it’s like to be in love, so it’s hard for me to say that it could never happen. All I know is that you don’t make my heart flutter, or my stomach do backflips, like you said to Dumbledore. You make me happy, probably unnaturally so because of my situation. You make me feel good about myself. Who knows, maybe that’s the kind of thing that leads to being in love. How would I know? I know you’d feel horrible if I got my heart broken. You can’t do much else.”

She thought for another minute; Harry didn’t say anything, since he could tell she had more to say. She took a deep breath. “Okay, you’re always telling me personal stuff, so I am now. If I’ve ever thought about being with you, being in love with you, one thing has always squelched the idea. I feel like I wouldn’t deserve you, like my past taints me. What I’ve been, what I’ve done, is so awful that...” She stopped for a moment to compose herself. “You’re not perfect, Harry, but you have a very good heart. You’d never deliberately hurt anyone. Not even Malfoy if you have a choice. I like to think I have a good heart now, but before I didn’t. You deserve someone like yourself.” Her face reflected this self-image.

Harry’s heart went out to her. “Pansy, that’s ridiculous. You’re different now. When I look at you I don’t see that.”

“I know that, Harry. That’s one reason I love being with you. You see me as who I am, or who I want to be. But I’m talking about how I see myself, and that’s

hard for you to understand. Maybe it's easier for you to be forgiving of me than for me to be forgiving of myself. I don't know. Part of me understands that it's not right, that if I'm a good person now I'm as 'deserving' as anyone else. But the part that sees myself as undeserving is stronger. I'm not even sure I know why, I just know that it does." She saw the sorrow in his eyes, and added, "I know you don't know what to say. I doubt Hermione or Ginny ever had cause to spill their guts to you like this." He shook his head; she nodded. "So you must not know what to think."

"I know that I'd never hold your past against you like that, and I would never think you're not deserving of me. I have so much respect for you, Pansy... it's like you're trying to climb a difficult mountain. I guess then I would be a lifeline, but you have to do the hard part yourself. You have a lot to be proud of, and I'm definitely proud of you."

Her eyes shone. "Thank you, Harry. Maybe I just need to hear that once in a while. I don't think I can change my self-image overnight, but what you said helps... Harry... have you ever felt undeserving?"

That was an easy question for Harry. "Sure, of course. I'm the Boy Who Lived, remember? All my life in the wizarding world, most people have treated me as if I'm part of the royal family or something, were extra nice to me, were honored to meet me, whatever. And what had I done? Survive a curse when I was one year old because of my mother's sacrifice? Did I deserve all that? Of course not. For a long time, I felt undeserving every time someone was nice to me because I was Harry Potter. Like I was a phony or something... 'no, that's not me, you must be thinking of someone else, I'm just a normal person.' And I've told you how my aunt and uncle treated me, so I probably felt undeserving from that, too."

She nodded. "At least you got to feel undeserving despite who you really were. I feel undeserving because of who I really was. But I suppose it feels the same way in the end. Maybe that's why I'm doing this, I have to do something to make myself feel deserving... not just of you, but anyone who's a good person." She

sighed. “I’m sorry, a lot of this is like what I’ve said before. And I knew it was going to take some time. I just hadn’t put it in terms like ‘I don’t deserve Harry Potter’ before. It’s like you’re my counselor.”

He shook his head ruefully. “No, it’s more like I’m your sympathetic ear. A counselor actually offers insight and helpful advice. I don’t do much of that. I just listen.”

“Well, you do a very good job of it.”

“You know,” said Harry, “what I would advise you to do, is go talk to Professor Dumbledore. He listens, and has good advice. I’ve always felt better after I’ve talked to him, about anything. I mean, I don’t want you not to talk to me... I feel good that you’re comfortable doing it. But it’s hard for me to know what to say to help you. I’m sure he would.”

“But you have a relationship with him,” Pansy pointed out. “I barely know him. How can I just go to his office and start telling him stuff like this?”

Harry gave her a serious look. “Because I’m telling you, you can. I wouldn’t suggest this unless I was certain that you’d feel better for doing it. It doesn’t matter if he doesn’t know you that well. He would listen to anyone who needed to talk to him. But he’d be sympathetic to you anyway; he knows you’re taking risks to help me, he knows how isolated you are. Trust me, he’d be very helpful.”

“Well, then he comes highly recommended. Maybe I will. Thank you. Oh, by the way, there was something I wanted to tell you. Not that important, but it’s strange. You play Slytherin on Saturday, right? Well, Malfoy’s been acting really strange about that. Talking about how he’s going to beat you. Well, he always says stuff like that, never manages it, but it sounds different this time. He has this attitude like he’s celebrating in advance, like it’s a sure thing. When I ask him how he’s so sure, he acts like ‘I’ve got a secret and if you’re nice enough to me I might tell you what it is.’ Pretty childish for a sixteen-year-old, really. But I thought you ought to know that. Whatever it is, it could even be dangerous to you. Keep an eye on him.”

“Problem is, in Quidditch, I have to keep both eyes on the Snitch, or else we’re going to lose. Don’t worry, he’s not going to do anything that could injure me in front of three hundred people. He’s not that far gone.”

“He would if he thought he could get away with it, I’m sure of that.”

“Well, that’s true,” Harry admitted. “And his opinion of what he could get away with might be different from reality. Well, I have to keep an eye on him anyway, know where he is just in case I have to dive for the Snitch. I’ll keep my eyes open for anything unusual.” Pansy nodded, but didn’t look very reassured.

“Harry!” He heard Hermione’s voice from the classroom; he and Pansy walked out to meet her. “Hi, Pansy,” said Hermione warmly.

“Is it that obvious?” Pansy asked in dismay. Harry and Hermione exchanged puzzled looks.

“What?” asked Hermione.

Now Pansy looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry, I thought... something was bothering me and I told Harry about it, and I was all upset. You seemed like you were being nice to me, and I thought maybe you noticed.”

“I’m sorry, Pansy... no, I didn’t, I just... I know how hard what you’re doing is, and I really appreciate that you’re doing it. I hadn’t thought about it.”

Pansy smiled, embarrassed. “Thank you, Hermione. That kind of thing is what I need to hear right now.”

Hermione nodded sympathetically and looked around the room. “I have to show you something, let’s go back into the office.” They followed her back in.

“This is something I did mostly with you in mind, actually,” she said, looking at Pansy. “We have the Marauder’s Map, and you could really use something like it. So this has been a little project I’ve been working on.”

Pansy was amazed. “How do you find time for projects when you have ten classes?” Harry was impressed as well.

Hermione shrugged, and took out what looked like an advertising flyer. “This is, obviously, a fold-out flyer for cosmetics. I chose it partly because it

wouldn't be conspicuous, and it's the kind of thing Malfoy would think nothing of if he found. Also, when you fold it out, it has a decent surface area." She demonstrated. "Now, Harry, please don't say anything until I tell you otherwise. Pansy, after I wave my wand, please say the word 'open,' and tap the map with your wand, okay?" Pansy looked confused, but nodded. Hermione waved her wand, and Pansy said the word.

Immediately the flyer changed into a map of Hogwarts, a very detailed one. Pansy and Harry gasped in appreciation. Pleased at their reactions, Hermione continued. "Obviously it's based on the Marauder's Map; I've made some modifications that should be helpful. One of them, as you see, is to color-code what type of person it is. Red is Gryffindor, green is Slytherin, yellow is Hufflepuff, blue is Ravenclaw, and black is for teachers and staff. So if anybody's out of place from where they should be, it'll be obvious by their color."

Hermione went on to explain more features: one could zoom in on each house's common room and dormitories so the names would be easier to read, any person's name could be changed to bright gold so as to highlight them, and a person's recent movements could be viewed in a speeded-up fashion. She decided to use Harry to demonstrate.

"Pansy, could you say, 'Harry Potter, four hours?'"

Pansy looked uncertain. "Sure, but why not you?"

"When I asked you to say the word that opened the map, I charmed your voice to it. It will respond only to your voice now, so there's no chance that anyone could use it if they found it. If anyone other than you tries to touch their wand to it, nothing will happen."

Pansy shook her head in wonder. "Harry Potter, four hours," she said. Suddenly the map was clear, except for Harry's dot and name. Hermione said, "Okay, he was in the staff room four hours ago, then he talked to Dumbledore, then went to the bathroom... sorry, Harry..." Harry rolled his eyes as Pansy giggled.

“Then to our Care of Magical Creatures class, then to Gryffindor Tower, then here. You can adjust the speed at which it plays back, but this is a pretty good one.

“Now, here’s the best feature, the one that was hardest to do. The map will make a person’s name blink if they’ve been anywhere unusual in the past twenty-four hours. This doesn’t work now; the map has to accumulate enough information to know where people usually go. After a week, it should have enough information to start doing that. This could obviously be very useful. Oh, and I made Malfoy’s color purple, since I assume he’s the one you’ll be looking out for, mostly. That’s pretty much everything. Obviously you should only use it someplace really private, like a bathroom stall, or your bed.”

Pansy looked at Hermione in gratitude and confusion. “You did all this just for me?”

“Well, I’ve made copies for each of us, too; once you’ve made one, the others are much easier. Also, it wasn’t only me; Ernie helped me with a few things. And no, Harry, he doesn’t know who it’s for. I told him it was because we were concerned about another Death Eater, which is true, if a bit indirect. But yes, Pansy, it was mainly for you.”

“Why?” asked Pansy. “This must have taken hours of effort.”

“Pansy, you’re risking your life to help keep Harry safe. As far as I’m concerned, that’s a very worthwhile cause. Of course, I’m going to do everything I can to help you. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Pansy still looked stunned. “I don’t know what to say, Hermione. Thank you. This will be extremely helpful.” Now Harry thought that she might be about to cry. “I’m sorry, it’s just... I’m not used to people doing nice things for me like that.”

“It’s all right, Pansy. You deserve it,” Hermione assured her.

Pansy chuckled. “Funny that you should say that, considering what we were just talking about.” To Harry’s surprise, Pansy related the main points of their conversation. “And it’s nice of you to worry that I’d fall in love with him,” she added, now smiling at Hermione’s obvious embarrassment.

“Well, I can just see how it could happen. He is pretty lovable.” From Hermione’s grin, Harry could tell that she meant what she said, but also enjoyed the embarrassment she knew it would cause Harry.

“Can I ask you something kind of personal, Hermione?” Pansy asked. Hermione nodded. “How is it that you’ve never fallen in love with him? I mean, you’re always around each other, and half the school thinks you’re an item anyway, or has thought so.”

“Excuse me, I’m just going to sit under the Invisibility Cloak and pretend I’m not here,” said Harry, visibly blushing.

“Oh, be quiet, Harry,” said Hermione, smiling. She turned back to Pansy. “He is cute when he’s embarrassed, isn’t he?” They both chuckled. “It’s a good question. I have thought about it, of course, but I’m not sure why. The obvious answer is that I cherish him too much as a friend to risk that with the complications of a relationship. But that probably wouldn’t stop me if I were in love with him. Maybe I just got so used to him as a friend, from a young age, that I put him in this category of being a friend. So, I could speculate for hours, and I’m sure Harry would love that. But in the end, I’m not sure that I know. Sorry I can’t answer any better than that.” The thought occurred to Harry that from his side of the situation, he wouldn’t have wanted to be in love with or married to someone with Hermione’s exact personality, given how she so often tried to tell he and Ron what to do. He could overlook it in a friend, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to find out what it would be like to have a girlfriend like that. He wasn’t sure, but he assumed that was part of the reason he had never thought of her in a romantic way.

“No, I can understand that,” Pansy said. “It makes sense. I’m not sure anybody really understands how that works. I wish there was some control I could set on the setting of ‘he’s just a friend,’ but I guess I’ll just have to take my chances.” She smiled at Harry.

He shook his head and said, “Well, I guess I’m happy enough that you’re comfortable teasing me to not get annoyed. But I don’t know how much more of this I can take. Ron would have run screaming from the room by now.”

Pansy chuckled; Hermione laughed out loud. “Yes, he would’ve,” Hermione agreed. “Not very expressive, our Ron. But we love him anyway.”

“Well, I should go,” said Pansy. “Thank you again, Hermione. This was really nice. See you later.” She put the new map into her robes and left the office.

Harry looked at Hermione. “Bet you really enjoyed that,” he said grumpily.

“Well, of course. But it’s also nice for Pansy and I to have a laugh together at your expense. It helps us get closer.”

“Glad I could help. By the way, I really am impressed with what you did with that map. It’s great. I can see why she was so happy.”

“Thank you, Harry. I must admit, I am proud of it. But like I said, Ernie helped, and also I had lots of help getting started from Remus.” To Harry’s raised eyebrows, she continued, “I had the idea way back near the beginning of the year. You told me that Pansy said she wished the Marauder’s Map could tell where a person had been, and that gave me an idea. So I spent a while talking to Remus the night of your shield’s demonstration, and he told me about the basics of how it worked, and how to get started. He saved me hours of work. The hardest thing was the modifications I made. The Marauder’s Map was only made with rule-breaking in mind, not spycraft. But I’m happy with how it came out.”

“You should be, it’s really good,” said Harry. “Hmmm... I was going to say, let’s get back to Gryffindor Tower, but it’s not too far from dinnertime. We might as well wait and go straight there. I want to finish eating quickly, since tonight’s our last Quidditch practice before the match.”

She nodded. “So, have the first years been able to do anything to help Pansy much?”

“Apparently not. She thinks there’s just been nothing to see. But she said she’s getting to know them better. Sometimes she talks to them in their common rooms, and they’re comfortable with her now. So, that’s good.”

“Harry... don’t you think Ron is getting too intense about the Quidditch? I’m getting kind of concerned about him.”

“This happens with every Quidditch captain,” Harry assured her. “Especially at first, they’re really intense like this. Wood was always that way, of course, but I think Ron’ll be okay. I think he’ll relax a bit after we beat Slytherin. And we will, we’ve never lost to them; they don’t pick players for their skill.” He decided not to relate what Pansy had said, because he feared Hermione would worry and continually badger him to be careful.

“Harry! You in here?” Ron shouted from the classroom. Harry shouted back, and Ron joined them. “What’s up?” asked Ron.

“It seems that your focus on Quidditch is a bit much, Ron,” said Harry. Hermione gave him a dirty look.

“Yes, she’s mentioned that to me too,” Ron answered, as if Hermione weren’t there. “I just try to ignore her.”

Before Hermione could respond, Harry countered, “Yeah, but are you sure you aren’t ignoring her because you’re too focused on Quidditch?”

Rolling her eyes, Hermione said, “All right, that’s enough. I’m not going to give you your presents if you’re not nice to me.”

Ron blinked. “What presents?”

“These are good, Ron. You’re going to want to be nice to her,” Harry advised.

“Absolutely right, Harry,” agreed Hermione. She proceeded to take out Harry and Ron’s maps and demonstrate them. Ron was suitably impressed. “Wow, you did this all yourself?”

“Like I told Harry, Remus helped at the beginning, and Ernie at the end.”

“How did Ernie get involved?” wondered Ron.

“Well, he’s pretty good at Charms, and somehow it just came up in conversation at the library. He thinks it was just for us, and I made sure he knew not to tell anyone. Ron, here’s yours. As you’re so focused on Quidditch these days, yours was made from an order form from Quality Quidditch Supplies. Harry, I made yours from Fred and George’s catalog. Not that we’re going to get into much trouble if we get caught, but best just to keep it low profile. I’ll give Ginny hers later.”

“Thanks, Hermione. It’ll be really good for us to each have our own copy of this. Kind of makes the Marauder’s Map obsolete, though, doesn’t it?”

“Remus mentioned that himself. He didn’t mind, though. I’m sure we could find someone who could use it.”

“I was going to say, give it to Ernie, as a thank-you for helping you, but then I realized that he’d never be the type to use it anyway,” Harry said.

“No, he’d be the type to confiscate it,” Ron agreed. “Perfect Head Boy material. You two’ll get along great next year, Hermione.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Hermione, looking like she did in fact know what he meant.

“Well, Hermione,” said Harry, trying to divert her attention from Ron, “I think most people assume that you and he will be Head Boy and Girl next year. It does seem pretty likely, if you think about it.”

“You know, good grades, responsible, orderly,” Ron agreed.

“It doesn’t bother you to think you might not get it?” asked Hermione.

Ron shook his head. “I’m not even the prefect type, really. I only got it because they didn’t want to give it to Harry because of all the other stuff he had going on, with Voldemort having come back and everything.”

Harry wondered why Ron thought that. It was true, but he had never said it to Ron. “Well, if you think about it, I’m not the prefect type either. I’m not a great student, and I don’t care much about people breaking the rules.”

“Harry, it’s not just about that,” pointed out Hermione. “It’s about having leadership qualities, and you can’t possibly deny that you have that. You’ve taken a leadership role in the whole wizarding community, for heaven’s sake. I’m sure they’d make you Head Boy next year if it weren’t for the fact that you’ll be the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. They still may, for all I know.”

“Wait a minute, who says I’m going to be the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher next year? I wasn’t aware that that was set in stone or anything.”

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look, annoyed at Harry’s obtuseness. “Harry, you have the job,” Ron pointed out. “What do you think they’re going to do, fire you?”

Harry tilted his head. “I hadn’t thought of it like that. I’m so used to the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher lasting only one year, I hadn’t even thought beyond this year. I guess I see what you mean, though. If I survive the year. I could still end up on your Hall of Misfortune, Ron.”

Ron sighed. “I knew that was going to come up sooner or later. Harry, the job is yours for as long as you want it. They don’t fire teachers, certainly not ones that have your status. Just based on what you’ve done this year, you could keep the job for life. I know you want to be an Auror, so you’ll probably give up this job after next year. We’re just saying, this is your job if you want to keep it, just like Charms is Flitwick’s job. Dumbledore or the school won’t see you two any differently. But, yes, they probably won’t make you Head Boy while you’re a teacher. It would be too weird.”

“Ron... remember when we looked into the Mirror of Erised?”

Ron nodded. “I know what you’re going to say. I saw myself as Quidditch captain with the Quidditch Cup, and as Head Boy. I’ve done two of those now. But that was when I was eleven. I’ve done stuff now. Okay, more properly, I’ve helped you do stuff. But that’s not important to me anymore. I don’t feel like I need to outshine my brothers. I mean, Bill and Charlie are so much older that they seem more like uncles than brothers, Fred and George aren’t the types I’d feel

competitive with, and Percy showed that being Head Boy is no guarantee you won't be an overambitious, arrogant, unprincipled jerk. I don't feel like I have anything to prove to my brothers."

"That's good, Ron," said Hermione. "That's a good attitude. By the way, what's the latest with Percy? I never did ask during the summer."

"I try not to think about it too much," said Ron. "Doesn't involve me, really. But it's not much better. He's showing signs of moving back in our direction, but with the exception of Mum, none of us are sure we really want him back. After all, he turned his back on his family because he thought it would be good for his career advancement. That says what kind of person he is. If he comes back now, it'll really look like it's because the Ministry is cooperating with Dumbledore now, and not because he regrets what he did. I'd have to hear a pretty serious apology before I'd really think about considering him a family member."

Nobody answered for a moment. Then Harry said, "That sounds harsh and unforgiving, but I really see what you mean. What he did was a deliberate betrayal. I didn't even want to forgive Marietta Edgecombe, and Percy is your brother."

"Not to mention what he said about you in that letter. I haven't forgotten that, either." Harry nodded to let Ron know that he appreciated Ron's indignation on his behalf.

"Are your parents having arguments about it, Ron?" asked Hermione.

"If they are, they're keeping them quiet. I think my Dad feels strongly enough about it to really argue with her. Normally she's the one who feels strongly, and he lets her have her way because it's easier than fighting. But I suspect that Mum knows now isn't a good time to really press Dad about it. Probably she's hoping for a different situation, but I'm not sure what that would be."

"It's so sad," Hermione said. "I know Percy did something terrible, but it's really bad when families are split up." Neither Harry nor Ron had anything to say to that.

“Let’s go get some dinner,” Harry suggested. “It’s time now, and we want to get to that practice. I’m starting to feel real focused on Quidditch.”

Ron grinned and Hermione shook her head as they headed out of the classroom and to the Great Hall.

Saturday morning, the day before Halloween, was a sunny and surprisingly warm day, no doubt one of the last mild days of the year. Perfect for Quidditch, Harry thought as he looked out the windows of the Great Hall at the blue sky.

As Harry glanced over at Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherin team, he couldn’t help but think that normally, Malfoy would have come over and tried to taunt them. The reason he hadn’t had to be that Harry was a teacher now. Malfoy, having already served twenty hours of detention at Harry’s orders, was obviously in no mood to give Harry any further opportunities, and he had to wonder whether harassing any of Harry’s teammates would be such an opportunity. Harry focused on bucking up Dennis Creevey, who was very nervous. Harry told Dennis how nervous he was before his first match, and assured him it was normal.

“After the match, we’re staying to watch the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff match, right?” asked Dennis.

“Yes, Dennis. There are seats reserved for us to watch after we play.”

“Why are both games being played on the same day, anyway?” asked Hermione, who was sitting near the team.

“It’s for security reasons,” explained Harry. “The stands might make for a good target, so they have extra security, and they want to play both matches at once because it’s more efficient, they don’t have to arrange all the extra security twice.”

“But nobody’s really going to attack, are they?” asked a slightly alarmed Dennis.

“No, almost certainly not, Dennis,” Harry assured him. “This is just to be really careful. Now, you should have more breakfast.”

Dennis halfheartedly took another bite of his food, but Harry recognized this form of pre-match jitters, and decided to leave Dennis alone. He looked around the Hall again and saw a familiar figure approach.

“Tonks!” He got to his feet and greeted her. “What are you doing here?”

She put a hand on his shoulder. “Well, I heard the post of girlfriend was still open. Thought I’d see how you felt about older women.” Everyone nearby laughed, and she smiled at Harry’s embarrassment.

“Not you, too,” he said, reluctantly smiling. “Everyone, this is... Tonks, she only goes by the one name. She’s an Auror. And I doubt she’s that much older than me.”

Her eyes lit up playfully. “Ooh, thank you, Harry. Sounds like I might have a shot.”

He decided to tease her back. “Well, you are quite attractive... most of the time.” He could tell that his teammates were surprised that he would say that. She knew what he was referring to, and played along. “What, you mean you don’t like this one?” she pouted, changing her nose to look more like a pig snout. The Gryffindors who had never met her gasped; Tonks explained her unusual ability as she ran through a few hair and nose changes. “I could actually make myself more attractive, but I’m afraid to. People would like it, and then be disappointed when I went back to my real face.”

“So what are you doing here, really, Tonks?” Harry asked.

“Harry, haven’t these girls been teaching you anything? When a woman puts down her appearance, you’re supposed to compliment her. You should have said, “Tonks, you couldn’t make yourself any more attractive than you already are.””

“Tonks, you couldn’t make yourself any more attractive than you already are,” Harry said obligingly.

“Okay, that’s a start, next time you just have to say it like you mean it,” she grinned. “To answer your question, I’m part of the security today. A few other

Aurors and I will be patrolling the edges of the pitch on our brooms. I'm sure we'll also sneak a look at the game from time to time, so do well, Harry.”

“I always try,” he assured her.

“Okay, everyone, time to go,” announced Ron. The Gryffindor team got up, to applause from the rest of the table, and headed out toward the changing rooms near the pitch. Harry gave Hermione and Tonks a last wave.

After they changed, Harry wondered if Ron was going to give a speech. Wood usually had, but Ron hadn't been on the team then. Angelina hadn't been much for speeches. Ron simply said, “Okay, everyone, we can do this. Dennis, you'll be fine, just focus on what you're doing. Harry, the sooner you catch the Snitch, the sooner we get into Hogsmeade. Let's go.”

They headed out. “Very inspirational, Ron,” teased Ginny.

“I liked it better than Wood's,” Harry countered. “He always wanted to make it sound like the history of the universe would be affected by the match. I think keeping it low-key is better.”

“Thank you,” Ron said, raising his eyebrows at Ginny.

The crowd were already in their seats, the atmosphere one of excitement, as usual. They walked onto the pitch. Dumbledore was there talking to Madam Hooch, which surprised Harry. He assumed it had to do with security, that Dumbledore wanted to be on hand in case anything happened. He felt better; Dumbledore's presence was always reassuring.

Dumbledore spoke, his voice magically amplified. “Ladies and gentlemen, a few announcements before the matches begin. Firstly, I am pleased to introduce our new commentator, Mr. Colin Creevey.” He got loud applause from Gryffindors, polite applause for Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, and less from the Slytherins. He cheerfully waved at the Gryffindor team.

“Circling the stadium,” Dumbledore continued, “are three Aurors from the Ministry of Magic. They are here as an extra security precaution, and I thank them

for coming here today.” Dumbledore applauded, as did most of the crowd, following his example.

“Lastly, as an additional security precaution, I have arranged for the pitch, and the area directly above it, to be monitored by magic-detection instruments. If any magic is used in the airspace within the field of play, alarms will sound and play will be stopped. If that should occur, all players should descend to the ground immediately and await further instructions. Madam Hooch?”

“Thank you, Headmaster. Captains, shake hands.” Montague, the seventh-year Slytherin captain, stepped forward to meet Ron. Ron knew that Montague would try to crush his hand, so Ron made no bones about doing the same. The handshake looked like a draw; both were probably in pain, Harry thought, but neither would give the appearance of it. The players mounted their brooms.

Madam Hooch blew the whistle, and the players kicked off and shot into the air. Harry flew a standard search pattern, designed to maximize any possibility of seeing the Snitch. A glance behind told him that Malfoy was following him. Why can't he look for it on his own? thought Harry, annoyed. He remembered what Pansy had said, but it was hard for him to keep an eye open for someone right behind him. He was glad that any magic would be detected; there wasn't that much that was non-magical that Malfoy could do to hurt him. Harry returned his mental focus to finding the Snitch, and with half an ear listened to Colin's commentary, which to him sounded surprisingly practiced. Colin's the type who would practice this, Harry thought.

“...and it's Gryffindor in possession, Ginny Weasley with the Quaffle, dodges a Bludger hit by Crabbe, nice bit of flying there... passes to Bell, who immediately drops it to a low-flying Creevey who's past all defenders, he shoots... saved by Bletchley, looked like it was just wide anyway. Bletchley passes to Warrington, who looks to have caught Gryffindor out of position, he's all alone, advancing on Ron Weasley, he's in position, he shoots... right down the middle, saved by Ron Weasley. Bletchley fainted left, Ron started to go for it but was able to

lunge back to the center in time to save it, score still zero-zero. Bell with the Quaffle, almost collides with Goyle, Sloper and Kirke on either side, each just knocked a Bludger away..”

Harry stayed in his search pattern, Malfoy still behind him. When he checked on Malfoy, Malfoy had a very smug look, as though he was looking forward to something happening. Harry couldn't help but wonder what it was, but again made himself forget about it and concentrate on the game. Who knows, he thought, maybe this whole attitude is an attempt to distract me, make me lose focus. He again focused his attention on looking for the Snitch. Just to see what Malfoy would do, he went into a dive; Malfoy naturally followed. Trusting his instincts, Harry dodged and weaved through the players on the way down. Malfoy, trying to follow, collided with Crabbe and was lucky to stay on his broom. Colin Creevey couldn't keep a chuckle out of his voice.

“...that's the problem with following, you don't have as much control as the one leading has. Malfoy rights himself and sets off after Potter, who's opened quite a distance between them. Meanwhile, Bell passes to Creevey, who has a shot, takes it... blocked. Slytherin in possession, Pucey, passes up to Warrington, intercepted by Ginny Weasley! She passes it to Creevey, who just has to get past Pucey... Creevey shoots and he's fouled! Bletchley dives and misses, it's in for the goal! Creevey's shaken up, took quite a low blow from Pucey there. Well, it's true, Professor,” said Colin, as McGonagall shot him a warning look.

Madam Hooch blew the whistle and signaled the foul, which meant that Gryffindor would be given possession again. “Bell with the Quaffle, passes to Ginny Weasley, back to Bell, back to Ginny Weasley again, Creevey trying to get free... Potter and Malfoy still circling, Malfoy still following Potter... Creevey flies straight up, gets more or less a handoff from Ginny Weasley... they head toward the goal passing back and forth to each other... Warrington tries to intercept, fails... Creevey shoots, no, feints left, shoots right, scores! Twenty-zero Gryffindor! Well

done, Dennis! Bletchley went for the feint completely, leaving the right goal wide open. Slytherin in possession...”

Harry found himself surprised that Slytherin had not yet committed many egregious fouls; he supposed they would increase as Slytherin fell behind. Over the next fifteen minutes, Slytherin managed one goal against Ron, but Gryffindor scored two more, both by Dennis, for a forty-ten lead. No Gryffindor but Dennis had taken a shot on goal; Ginny had told Harry that she and Katie would try to make sure Dennis took as many shots early as possible, to help him build his confidence. It seems to be working, Harry thought. He continued his search for the Snitch.

“...and Montague shoots, saved by Ron Weasley, who rushed toward Montague at the last moment, cutting off his angles to shoot, nicely done, Ron... Ron passes to his sister, who flies down the field, weaving in and out, avoiding a Bludger from Crabbe... Goyle swings at the other Bludger and misses, nearly falls off his broom... here they come, Ginny Weasley still in possession, Creevey double-teamed by Pucey and Warrington, they must be tired of him scoring... Ginny Weasley to Bell, to Creevey as he shakes off one of his defenders using Kirke as a shield... Creevey going for the goal area, FOULED BY PUCEY!” Colin practically screamed. “Madam Hooch blows the whistle, that was a particularly bad foul, hope Dennis is okay, Katie and Ginny flying over to him to make sure. Yes, he’s all right, that’s good. He sets up for the penalty shot, he shoots... good! The shot is good, and the score is fifty-ten Gryffindor!”

Harry was still very focused on looking for the Snitch, but checked Malfoy every once in a while. He could never figure out why Malfoy followed him so closely; Harry had the faster broom, Malfoy could never hope to pass him.

“Warrington flies down the field, passes to Pucey, back to Warrington just as a Sloper Bludger nails Pucey, he’s rubbing his arm... Warrington flies past a steal attempt by Ginny Weasley, coming up on Ron Weasley, he shoots, deflected! Ron Weasley gets his fingertips on a certain goal, and the Quaffle flies just outside the

right goal. Really nice save there, that's seven saves in eight tries for Ron Weasley, an excellent match for him... Gryffindor in possession, and— Potter dives! I think he's seen it!"

Harry fleetingly wondered how Colin knew he wasn't feinting. He wasn't, however; he saw the Snitch near the ground in roughly the middle of the field. He pushed the Firebolt as fast as it would go, heard Malfoy behind him but knew Malfoy couldn't reach him... he had to keep focused on the Snitch...

Suddenly Harry felt disoriented, as though he was doing something but couldn't remember what it was. He looked around, but couldn't place his surroundings, or why he was there. His broom started to drift.

Then there was a loud noise, like an alarm, filling the stadium and further disorienting Harry. He felt as if he had been dropped into some strange dream and had no idea what to do, or how to go about figuring out what to do. Then he heard Dumbledore's voice, magnified. "All players, please land immediately and do not move once you are on the ground." Feeling as if he barely had wits enough to follow such a simple instruction, Harry slowly headed toward the ground.

"...apparently some magic has been detected on the field of play, the players are setting down, Potter looking none too steady on his broom, as if he had suddenly forgotten how to fly... sorry, Harry... two Aurors are taking up positions at each end of the field, one seems to be escorting Malfoy down to the ground, it'll be interesting to see what this is all about... the score again, fifty-ten Gryffindor when play was stopped—"

McGonagall motioned to Colin to stop talking, which he did. Dumbledore approached Harry as he landed. "Harry, are you all right?" Harry looked dazed, and couldn't think of how to answer the question. Dumbledore took out his wand and waved it at Harry, who felt as if he'd woken up out of a disorienting dream. "Harry, what happened?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know, I was going for the Snitch, and I suddenly felt like I forgot everything I ever knew, I didn’t even know what was going on... I don’t know how...” Understanding dawned. “Malfoy,” he said, furiously.

“I will take care of it, Harry,” Dumbledore assured him. “Stay here, and do nothing.” Dumbledore must be thinking that I’ll go after Malfoy like I did last year, Harry thought. While the idea was appealing, he wasn’t about to do it.

Harry watched Dumbledore walk over to Tonks, who had escorted Malfoy down. Dumbledore talked with Tonks for a moment, then Malfoy. Malfoy looked defiant, as if he were refusing a request. Harry then saw Snape and McGonagall join the group. There was more discussion, then Harry thought he saw a small object fly out of Malfoy’s robes and into Dumbledore’s hand. Malfoy had a look of outrage and guilt. Not guilt in the sense of feeling bad, Harry knew, but in the sense of having been caught. Dumbledore talked with Snape, McGonagall, Tonks, and Madam Hooch for another two minutes, then addressed the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. As you saw, the magic detection devices were activated by the presence of magic on the playing field. The sensors determined that the source of the magic was the Slytherin Seeker, Draco Malfoy, and it was directed at the Gryffindor Seeker, Harry Potter.” Out of respect for Dumbledore, the crowd did not boo, but it seemed to Harry that they wanted to. Harry could see Ron and Ginny, staying where they were instructed, looking very angry.

Dumbledore continued, “Mr. Potter, upon landing, was not able to answer any questions until I performed a countercurse. He then reported experiencing sudden and severe disorientation and memory loss. Upon investigation, Mr. Malfoy was discovered to be concealing a device known as a Confundus Beam, which emits a magic similar to the Confundus Curse, but more powerful, causing disorientation and memory loss in its target.”

Now, the crowd did boo, though still not as lustily as they might otherwise have. Dumbledore went on, “The disposition of the match is in the hands of

Madam Hooch, from whom you will be hearing shortly. Mr. Malfoy, however, will not play Quidditch until further notice, and will be escorted by his Head of House and myself to a meeting to determine further action. I now give you Madam Hooch.”

The crowd cheered, partly for Dumbledore and partly for the idea that Malfoy would be disciplined. Madam Hooch stepped forward.

“Such action as we just saw is deeply distressing to those who hope for and expect fair play in sports,” she announced. “Professor Dumbledore has informed me that Mr. Potter could easily have fallen off his broom, and that lengthy exposure to the device can cause long-term effects. Therefore, I must discourage this sort of thing in the strongest possible terms.

“Separate from any other sanctions that may or may not be imposed, Mr. Malfoy will not play Quidditch again until such time as I deem fit. An investigation will be conducted to determine who else knew about or assisted this, and they will be penalized as well.

“As for the disposition of this match... Mr. Potter had the Snitch in his sights when he was attacked. In his time at Hogwarts, there has never been a case in which he had the Snitch in his sights but did not end up with it, and he had a clear lead over Mr. Malfoy. I find that had he not been attacked, Mr. Potter would have caught the Snitch, and I adjudge the result accordingly. The match is declared over, the final score Gryffindor two hundred, Slytherin ten. Thank you.”

A loud cheer went up, though probably not nearly as big as it would have been in the case of a normal victory, Harry thought. Still, it would do. He walked toward Ron, then Ginny, putting an arm around their shoulders in congratulations. Both returned the gesture.

“Are you okay?” asked both at the same time.

He nodded. “As far as I can tell... at least I can talk and I know what’s going on, so that’s something.”

“I can’t believe he did that,” said Ginny furiously.

“I can,” said Ron. “Hugo said he wouldn’t mind killing Harry, remember?”

The other team members reached them, offering congratulations and making sure he was all right. Hermione had run down to the field as well; Harry assured all of them that he was fine. “Hey, great match, Dennis,” he said. Dennis smiled as the others congratulated him as well.

Suddenly Colin spoke over his loudspeaker again. “Dennis Creevey, Harry Potter, would you come up here for a minute, please?” Dennis and Harry shrugged and headed off.

“We’ll be waiting for you to join us to watch the other match,” said Ron, as he and the others headed off to the seats reserved for the teams.

Harry and Dennis walked up to where Colin was sitting. Colin gestured for them to sit down. “Ladies and gentlemen, Professor McGonagall has given me permission to end each match with a short interview with the ‘Star of the Match,’ the person most instrumental to the winning team’s success. For this match, that person is new Gryffindor Chaser Dennis Creevey, who scored all five of Gryffindor’s goals.” A big cheer went up from the Gryffindor supporters, and there was polite applause from others.

“But first, I’d like a quick word with the Gryffindor Seeker, Professor Harry Potter, who I’m sure many in the crowd are concerned about. Professor Potter, how do you feel right now?”

“First of all, Colin, on the Quidditch pitch, it’s Harry. You can call me ‘Professor’ in class.” This got a chuckle from the crowd. “To answer your question, I feel fine now.”

“I understand, Harry, but it sounded like that was a strong Confundus Curse. If you were still a bit confunded, would you be able to tell the difference?”

Harry laughed. “Well, if that’s true, Colin, then I’m not the one you should ask, am I? All I can say is I feel like I usually do.” Harry turned toward the field, took out his wand, and a silver stag erupted from his wand and ran the length of the pitch. “Yeah, I think I’m okay,” he added, as the impressed crowd applauded.

“Looks that way, Harry. I’m looking forward to working on that one in your classes. Now, were you surprised by what Malfoy did?”

“I’m not surprised that he would use underhanded tactics. He’s done it before. I am surprised that he would go this far.”

“Is Madam Hooch right, would you have gotten the Snitch?”

“Absolutely. It was in my sights. I had it, no doubt. Malfoy obviously thought so, too.”

“Harry, what do you think his punishment ought to be?”

Harry knew he had to swallow his true opinion. “I’m confident that Professor Dumbledore will handle the situation appropriately, Colin. It’s not for me to tell him what he should do.”

“Any other comments on the match, Harry?”

“Well, as a Seeker, I don’t always see that much of the match, as you know. But obviously Ron had a great match, I saw some of his saves... Ginny and Katie flew and passed very well, but moving on to the Star of the Match,” Harry continued as Dennis turned red, “Dennis did a great job in his first match, and the rest of us are very proud of him.” He patted Dennis on the back; Dennis looked ecstatic at the compliment.

“Thank you, Harry,” said Colin. “Now, let’s have a few words with Dennis..”

Harry rejoined the rest of the team, half-listening to Colin interview his brother. “You really must be okay, Harry,” Katie said, smiling. “That was a nice Patronus. I’ve seen you do it before, of course, but it’s still really good.”

Ron leaned in to Harry, so only he and Ginny could hear. “Kind of showing off a bit though, wasn’t it?”

Harry shrugged. “Well, you know what a show-off I am,” he joked. “I don’t know, I guess I felt entitled, after what happened. If I can do a Patronus, I’m probably not too confunded.”

“Yeah, leave him alone,” protested Ginny. Ron gave her a ‘what’s with you?’ look, then just looked ahead and continued listening to Dennis, who was saying, “...and Ginny and Katie kept passing it to me, and really well. They kept giving me the shots, so of course I was bound to score a lot..”

“At least he noticed,” commented Katie.

“Yes, some people would have decided they did it all by themselves,” agreed Ginny.

“And, Dennis, what were your feelings about what happened at the end of the match?” asked Colin.

“Of course, I was disgusted and angry, we all were. I think that if Malfoy thinks this is the only way he can beat Harry, then Slytherin should really start looking for a new Seeker.” This comment got loud applause. “He’s right about that!” agreed Ron loudly.

“Thank you very much. The Star of the Match, Dennis Creevey,” Colin finished, to more applause from the crowd. Looking proud and embarrassed, Dennis headed down toward where the rest of the Gryffindor team was sitting, preparing to watch the next match.

“So, what d’you think Malfoy’s going to get, Harry?” asked Ron.

“Good question,” Harry mused. “Thrown off the team, for sure. Detention, probably, but it seems like Malfoy doesn’t think of detention as a deterrent when it comes to me. I don’t see what Professor Dumbledore can do, short of expulsion, that would affect Malfoy.”

“Expulsion sounds good to me,” Ron said emphatically.

Harry shook his head. “Never happen. Professor Dumbledore won’t do it, not for something like this. I wouldn’t mind either, of course, but no. Probably just loads of detention. Poor Professor McGonagall...”

“Are you aware, Harry, that I am within range of the sound of your voice?” asked a straight-faced but obviously amused McGonagall, who was sitting two rows above them.

“Well, now I am,” smiled Harry, to chuckles from the rest of the team. “Besides, I was just expressing sympathy for you.”

“It sounded more like pity. I thank you for the thought, but I believe I will do just fine. I plan to have a word with Mr. Filch later, just in case.” The whole team laughed heartily, as McGonagall had obviously intended.

“What I can’t figure out,” said Harry to everyone, “is why Malfoy did it. I can see why he expected not to get caught when we came out onto the pitch, but when Professor Dumbledore made that announcement about the magic detectors, he might as well have been saying the words, ‘Malfoy, if you use that thing you’ll be caught, so don’t do it.’ So Malfoy goes ahead and does it anyway. Now, say what you want about Malfoy, he’s not an idiot. So, why?”

Ginny shrugged. “The thing we do know is that he’s got a real thing for you. Maybe he wanted to get you so badly that he decided not to let the idea of getting caught get in his way. He did the Snackboxes thing even though you warned him.”

Ron nodded. “He may not be an idiot, but people can have blind spots, specific areas where they act like idiots.”

“Like Harry when it comes to being modest,” Ginny suggested.

“Exactly,” Ron agreed, smiling at Harry.

“Or like you when it comes to anything to do with emotions,” Ginny continued.

“Exactly,” Harry couldn’t resist saying. Ron looked annoyed as the team laughed. “Actually, I shouldn’t talk,” Harry admitted. “I only got like I am now because I had to use love to fight off Voldemort. Before that, I was just as repressed as Ron.” The team chuckled at that as well.

“I prefer the word ‘reserved,’ if you don’t mind,” replied Ron with exaggerated dignity.

“Well, if Voldemort starts invading your mind, I think you’ll get un-reserved in a big hurry,” Harry said wryly.

“Harry, how do you think you’re different, exactly?” asked Dennis. “I mean, what’s changed?”

Harry felt like being a bit silly, so he said, “Well, I’ll show you, Dennis. Come here and give me a hug.”

The team broke up laughing, but to Harry’s surprise, Dennis actually got up and walked over for his hug. Harry gave it to him, prompting more laughter, after which a pleased and somewhat embarrassed Dennis sat back down.

“See, Dennis,” Harry continued, “last year, I wouldn’t have even made that joke, never mind actually hugging you. That’s a pretty big difference.”

Dennis smiled. “Oh, now you tell me you were just joking,” he said, to more laughter. “Don’t I feel stupid.”

“So are they pretty affectionate in your family, Dennis?” asked Ginny.

Dennis nodded. “Both my parents are always hugging and kissing us, and each other. It just doesn’t seem like a big deal.”

“I envy you that, Dennis,” said Harry. Dennis looked extremely impressed at the idea that Harry Potter envied him anything. “It wasn’t like that for me, as you know. It must be nice.”

“I guess you get used to it, you don’t think about it that much,” Dennis pointed out. “It just seems normal. What about your family, Ginny?”

“Oh, it’s probably about usual. The men are all pretty... reserved, I should say,” she said, grinning at Ron. “Ron will grudgingly deal with emotion if he has to, the twins just make a joke about it, like they do about everything, and Percy pretends it doesn’t exist. I think Bill and Charlie are a bit more relaxed, and so is Dad, but he was never a big hugger. Mum, of course, will hug and kiss anything that moves. Being the only other woman in the family, I guess I’m more like her. One thing I will say, I definitely approve of this new direction of Harry’s.” She smiled at him teasingly.

“Which new direction?” asked Hermione, just having joined them.

“Hugging people all the time,” replied Ginny.

“Oh, yes, I like that too,” agreed Hermione. Ron snickered.

“Well, I wouldn’t say ‘all the time,’” pointed out Harry. “I think I hadn’t done it for a few weeks at least, until now.”

“Well, you’ll have to step up the pace, Harry,” said Ginny. “I’ll scour Gryffindor Tower for volunteers. I think I might find a few.”

“Count me in,” said Katie.

“And after hearing I got one, my sister will be demanding one,” joined in Dennis.

“There does seem to be a lot of demand, Harry,” smiled Ginny. “Maybe it’s time to get another petition started.”

Harry laughed along with the rest; he found it hard to be bothered by being teased about that.

Their joking was interrupted by Madam Hooch announcing the start of the Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw match. Harry didn’t care that much which of these teams won, but found himself pulling a bit for Ravenclaw. He still liked Cho, and hoped for her sake that Ravenclaw would do well in the Quidditch Cup. As well as second place, he told himself.

Harry found while watching the game that he enjoyed listening to Colin’s commentary more than when he was playing. He thought Colin was quite good, at least as good as Lee, and less obviously biased. He mentioned this to Dennis, who said that he’d relay it to Colin.

Ravenclaw did end up winning, by a score of one hundred ninety to one hundred twenty; Hufflepuff appeared on the verge of a big win when Cho came up with the Snitch. Harry applauded enthusiastically, while the others did so politely. “Don’t be so excited, Harry,” Ron warned. “They’ll probably beat Slytherin, so if we beat Hufflepuff, we’ll be playing them for the Cup.”

“And if that happens, I’ll be doing everything I can to beat her, I promise,” said Harry with mild sarcasm, as if Ron should never have doubted it. Ginny raised her eyebrows, but said nothing. “Besides,” continued Harry, “look how many goals

they got scored off of them. I have a feeling the Ravenclaw Keeper isn't going to be the Star of the Match."

"No, he'll have to pick Cho," Dennis agreed. "Nobody else for Ravenclaw did well enough."

"It's funny how Quidditch is, really," said Hermione. "There's all this scoring and defending and chasing, but what it really comes down to is the team that gets the Snitch wins. I mean, Hufflepuff was clearly the better team, but because Cho got the Snitch, they lost. Wouldn't it be better if the Snitch counted for less, like fifty or sixty points, so it would be a big advantage but not a guaranteed win?"

Ron shook his head. "That's part of the fun of Quidditch. It's unpredictable. Anyone could win at any time."

"No matter how good or bad they are? I thought the whole point of sports was to be the better team, not to be luckier."

"It's not luck, Hermione. In all of Harry's matches in which he's ended up on his broom, he's gotten the Snitch seven times out of seven. Not to mention, once with a broken arm. Today should have been eight, would have been... you see my point. Harry's skillful, not lucky."

"I didn't mean that, Harry," Hermione protested. "I know you're good. But isn't it the case that in any game, the Snitch could suddenly appear closer to the other Seeker than to you, and you can't get it no matter how good you are?"

"Yes, that's true," Harry admitted. "It could happen."

"But that's not right in one way, Hermione," protested Ron, having sunk his teeth into the argument. "You make it sound as though if one Seeker sees the Snitch and is closer, that's it, it's over. But it often doesn't work that way. You heard Madam Hooch saying that every time Harry gets the Snitch in his sights, he ends up with it. But that's why he's so good; usually that's far from the case. The Snitch darts around so much, it's very hard to catch. So, yes, there is a bit of luck, but the better Seeker will end up with the Snitch at least three times out of four, probably more."

“Cho Chang, would you come over here, please?” asked Colin.

“Even so,” Hermione persisted, “it still seems that the Seeker has a disproportionate effect on the outcome of the game. It seems to me that you might as well just have a game in which only two Seekers look for a Snitch.”

“I don’t know, Hermione, I feel pretty useful,” Ginny said. “In fact, I like being a Chaser better than I liked being a Seeker last year. There’s more action, it’s more fun. I know I don’t have the same effect on the outcome of the game, but I don’t think that’s all there is to sports.”

Hermione shrugged. “It seems strange to me, but maybe there’s something about sports that I just don’t get.”

They stopped talking to listen to Cho talking to Colin, who had just asked her how she had found the Snitch. “Well, Colin, it just popped up not too far from where I was. It was just good luck, really.”

“See?” said Hermione, amused. Ron gave her an annoyed look.

“Do you have any general comments on the match, Cho?” asked Colin.

“Well, Hufflepuff played well, obviously, we were fortunate to end up with the win. They did an excellent job. Also, I’d like to congratulate them for playing without feeling the need to resort to Confundus Beams or other low and sickening means of cheating.” This denunciation of Malfoy’s tactics brought a large cheer from the crowd, including Slytherins.

“I take it that you’re unhappy with what happened to Harry,” said Colin unnecessarily.

“That’s putting it mildly, Colin. I was disgusted and appalled, and not just because Harry’s a personal friend. He really could’ve been hurt. Harry was too polite to answer your question about Malfoy earlier, but I’m not. I think he ought to be expelled.” This got a big cheer from the two-thirds of the crowd that had remained to hear the interview with Cho. “And if he were reinstated onto the Slytherin team, and our next match is against them, I’d refuse to play.” There was more applause. “Well, maybe I’d play if they strip-searched him before the match.”

This got a big laugh. “But he still disgusts me. And I’m sorry that your brother, who had such a great first match, had to have it end under circumstances like that.”

The Gryffindor team was still listening, and hearing that, they cheered and congratulated Dennis, who was still embarrassed, but enjoying the attention.

“Thank you, Cho. Ladies and gentlemen, the Star of the Match, Cho Chang.” The crowd gave one last round of applause, and headed out of the stadium, as did Harry and his teammates.

“Well, good for her,” said Hermione, walking out with them. “I know you couldn’t say what you thought, Harry, but I’m glad she did.”

“After today, I don’t think Malfoy will have many sympathizers left,” said Ron. “The other three houses already didn’t like him, and now he’s upset the Slytherins who like you, and the Slytherins who really wanted to win the Cup, since he helped them lose that match.”

Harry was on the left side of the group, with only Ginny on his left. He asked her, “So, are you going into Hogsmeade with us?” She looked around to make sure there was no one listening, and pulled him aside, letting the others go ahead.

“I’d love to, Harry, but I’m not going to. Some of my fifth year friends have been annoyed with me lately, saying that I prefer being with you and Ron and Hermione to being with them. Well, they didn’t say it exactly, but they’ve been making jokes, and I can tell they’re not happy. So I’m going to spend most of the time in Hogsmeade with them.”

Harry was surprised; he hadn’t known that she had that problem. “Sure, no problem,” he said.

“It is for me,” Ginny said, clearly unhappy. “To be honest, Harry, I’d rather spend the time with you three. I’m not as close to them as I am to you, I enjoy spending time with you more. But they’re my dormitory-mates, and if I started spending all my time with you three, I’d estrange myself from them, and I don’t want that.”

“I can understand that,” Harry agreed. “It’s too bad you’re not in the same year as us, then this wouldn’t be a problem. When did this start?”

“Mainly in the weeks after your fight with Voldemort. During that week, I spent as much time with you as I could, of course, and they understood that. But I unconsciously did it a lot afterwards, too, and they slowly started to feel like I thought they weren’t good enough for me. And that’s not the case, but how do I explain to them that while I like them, I like you more? So I want to put more effort into spending time with them. I just don’t want you to think that I don’t want to be around you guys all of a sudden.”

Harry put a reassuring arm around her shoulders as they walked. “Don’t worry, we’re not going to think that,” he said. She chuckled. “What?” he asked.

“It’s just that they’ve already made a couple of jokes about how you’re my boyfriend. This is only going to encourage them,” she said, referring to his arm.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, starting to move his arm away. Ginny reached up and firmly moved it to where it was before. “I didn’t say I wanted you to stop,” she said, putting her arm around his waist. They laughed, then he gave her shoulders a squeeze, and they let go. “Like I said, I want to encourage this new direction.”

“I suppose I should be sure to do that with Hermione in public, too, so people won’t get the wrong idea,” Harry joked.

“Well, then they’ll just think you can’t decide which of us you want, and you’re leading both of us on,” she pointed out. “So you can’t win, really. There’s no point in worrying about what people are going to think.”

“I guess I’ve been a celebrity long enough that I should have figured that out by now,” Harry agreed. He suddenly remembered something she’d said on the Hogwarts Express at the end of the last term. “So, you’re not going to spend any of the time this weekend with Dean?”

She glanced at him, confused. “Why would I—oh, that,” she said, then chuckled. “No, I was just messing with Ron. Almost every time I say something about being interested in this boy or that boy, he gets all weird, like he doesn’t

approve. Like it's any of his business who I see anyway. I don't need him hovering over me, making judgments about who I should or shouldn't see, so I'm hoping to break him of the habit by telling him a new name every now and then. Maybe he'll get tired of hearing about it and leave me alone. I've decided that if he really ticks me off, I'll tell him I'm interested in Crabbe or Goyle."

"That's mean," he said, as they both laughed. They said goodbye as they entered the castle.

Most of the school's students who were third years or older went directly from the stadium to Hogsmeade. Harry went back to Gryffindor Tower to change, and told Ron, Hermione, and Neville that he wanted to speak to Dumbledore quickly before going to Hogsmeade. So they decided that they would go ahead, and he would join them when he was finished.

He headed down the corridors to Dumbledore's office. He was about to turn one corner when he heard voices coming from ahead. He stopped because it sounded like Malfoy. He glanced around to make sure he wasn't seen behaving stealthily, then casually lingered where he was for a moment. The voices became clearer. He heard Malfoy saying, "...talking to Crabbe and Goyle. He was just introducing the stupid announcer, I thought it was going to be dumb stuff like that."

Harry then heard Snape's voice. "Then you deserve what you get, as much for stupidity as for breaking the rules," Snape said coldly. "I have told you many times that the headmaster is a person to be taken seriously, not only..." Harry couldn't hear any more as they walked away. He turned the corner and continued walking.

Harry could barely stifle a laugh. He hadn't been listening! Malfoy's contempt for Dumbledore had done him in, Harry thought gleefully. He hadn't thought Dumbledore would say anything worth listening to. As he approached

Dumbledore's office, Harry put his neutral face back on. This kind of reaction wasn't something he wanted Dumbledore to see. He knocked, the door opened.

"Ah, Harry, yes, I thought you might be stopping by. First of all, you have suffered no lingering effects from the Confundus Beam, I trust?" Harry nodded. "Good. I was sure my countercurse was thorough, but it is good to get confirmation. Now, was there something you wanted to ask me?"

"Well, one thing was that I was wondering why he would have done it, knowing that there was a magic-detection field up, but I just found that out on the way here." He explained what he'd heard in the halls.

Dumbledore nodded. "I put up the magic-detection field in hopes that it would discourage him from using the Beam; I would have preferred to avoid even a small risk of injury to you. But fortunately, the field identified the Beam so quickly that there was no chance for it to cause lasting harm."

Harry took a few seconds to process this. "You mean, you knew about the Beam before the match? How?"

"Pansy Parkinson came to me an hour before the match. She had just discovered what Mr. Malfoy was planning, and was unable to get to you covertly. It is better that she came to me, in any case. I knew to take her warning seriously; you may not have."

Harry thought again. "She shouldn't have done that," he said, worried. "Malfoy could figure out where it came from, and she could be in danger."

"On the contrary, Harry, she did exactly the right thing," Dumbledore replied. "This was not a mere prank; you could have been in serious danger. What she did today is exactly the sort of thing she hopes to accomplish by staying undercover."

"In any case, he will not figure it out. The magic-detection field, while not something I had planned to do, is a plausible enough security precaution that its presence would not raise suspicion. Mr. Malfoy will readily believe that he was the

victim of unfortunate happenstance, and his own inattention. No suspicion will fall on Pansy.”

“But if a few things like this happen, it will. She has to be very careful about what she lets us know. With enough evidence, Malfoy will suspect her.”

“Yes, Harry, but it is we who must be careful, not she. We are the ones who use or do not use the information. We must judge its importance, weighed against the possible risk to her. In the intelligence trade, there is such a thing as ‘information so good it cannot be used.’ This refers to very important information which, it is known to both sides, could only have come from one source. The side receiving the information must make a difficult choice. If they use the information, the other side will know, and the spy’s cover is blown. A highly important spy can no longer be used. But if they do not use the information, then it was not so useful to have the spy. The spy’s current information must be weighed against possible cumulative future information. It is usually not an easy choice to make.”

“Don’t you also have to think about the risk to the spy?” Harry asked, surprised that Dumbledore had not included this in his list of considerations.

“Of course one does, Harry, and in that sort of situation, it is usually possible to extract the spy before the sensitive information is used. But at high levels of statecraft, such information can save thousands of lives. Many spies have a sufficient sense of loyalty to the side they are working for that they would sacrifice their lives to save so many others. It depends on the person, of course.”

“Well, I don’t want Pansy taking that kind of risk for me,” Harry said firmly. “The last thing I need is someone else dying for me.”

“It is extraordinarily unlikely, Harry, which she understands as well. But what risk there is, she wishes to take. I strongly urge you not to criticize her in any way for what she has done, but rather to praise her. She needs to know that what she is doing is useful. It is very hard for her. You may express concern for her safety, but you must honor the risks she takes. As I have honored the risks you have

taken in your time here at Hogwarts, rather than tried to stop you out of concern for your safety.”

Harry was silently frustrated for a minute, looking around at various things in Dumbledore’s office. He regarded the portraits of the former headmasters, all pretending to be sleeping. He walked over to Fawkes, and petted him for a few seconds. Finally he sat back down in the chair opposite Dumbledore’s desk.

“I guess I haven’t made things easy for you over the past five years, have I?” Harry grudgingly admitted. “Always jumping in front of dangerous things, when you’d tried so hard to keep me alive. You could have justified stopping me by my age, but you didn’t. And I know how badly Pansy wants to help me.” He paused again, defeated. “All right, I understand, of course you’re right.” Harry looked at Dumbledore with a pained expression. “This is only going to get harder, isn’t it?”

Dumbledore nodded sympathetically. “Yes, and it could get much harder. I wish that were not the case, but it is. You may recall that this is a variation on the conversation we had after Hermione was Cursed.”

Harry realized that was true. His further thoughts were cut off by the door being knocked on, and opening. Snape entered, followed by a nervous Pansy Parkinson. “Ah, thank you, Severus. Good afternoon, Pansy.”

Pansy blanched when she saw Harry. She looked at him, then Dumbledore, then Snape. It was easy to see what she was thinking.

“Professor Snape is aware of your situation, Pansy,” Dumbledore said reassuringly, though Pansy did not look reassured. “He can be relied upon to keep the utmost discretion.” She looked back at Snape as though he were a stranger, then back to Harry again. Her eyes asked the question, do you trust him?

Harry nodded without hesitation. “I trust Professor Snape,” he said. She breathed a sigh of relief, and flew into his arms. “You’re okay, right?” she whispered. “I’m fine, thanks to you,” he whispered back. She backed away and looked into his eyes. His expressed concern, pride, and gratitude; hers, affection and relief. Harry reflected that a lot of communication was done without speaking.

Responding to Harry's last non-whispered comment, Snape said, annoyed, "It is more accurate to say, Professor Potter, that you trust the headmaster, and he trusts me. It works out the same, of course, but I never would have supposed that a student of my own house would have required you to vouch for my trustworthiness."

"That's because I'm the one she's risking her life to protect," Harry retorted.

"The risk to her life is small in the extreme, Professor," responded Snape, appearing to be trying very hard to remain polite. "It is only your sense of melodrama—"

"Tell that to Hermione," shot back Harry. "If you can tell me there won't be any more Notts, then I'll believe that her life isn't in danger. Can you tell me that?"

"Of course we do not know whether more students will cast their lot with the Dark Lord, Professor, which is why Miss Parkinson's activities are useful. But if she takes sensible precautions, her role need not be discovered. In your concern for her safety, you exaggerate the danger to her considerably."

"I think he's right about that, Harry," Pansy agreed. "You do worry too much."

"Headmaster," nodded Snape, dismissing himself. Dumbledore nodded back, and Snape left.

"Pansy, I agree with you in part," said Dumbledore, "but Harry is in a sense responsible for your life. I have carried such burdens for many years, but it is new to Harry. It is only natural that he be concerned, perhaps to a degree you consider excessive. It is because he cares for you that he does so."

"I know," she said. She turned to Harry and said, "I'll tell you what, Harry. You try not to worry about me so much, and I'll try to be patient with the worrying you do. How about it?"

Harry nodded, not so much because he thought he could do it as because he didn't want to argue about it. He paused. "I also, of course, want to thank you

for what you did. Professor, what do you think would have happened if Pansy hadn't warned you?"

"We cannot say for certain, of course, but we can speculate. Mr. Malfoy's Beam was only in contact with you for one second before it was stopped. He could have kept it on you for perhaps five seconds without drawing undue attention, and perhaps longer after he caught the Snitch. After such exposure, you could easily have fallen off your broom, and it is entirely possible that you could have suffered permanent mild brain damage."

Harry continued, being sure to make eye contact with her. "So, that's what you saved me from. I'm very, very grateful."

Her eyes filled with pride; she took his hand, and just nodded. After a moment, she turned to Dumbledore. "So, is he going to get expelled?"

Dumbledore gave her a serious look. "I am aware this is not what you wish to hear, Pansy, but no, he will not."

She stared at him in frustration. "After what he did? After what you said could have happened to Harry? Wouldn't that be considered an assault, worse yet, an assault on a teacher?"

"There are many elements to this, Pansy, which make it difficult to take extreme measures against Mr. Malfoy. Some will seem like technicalities to you, but they are important nonetheless. First of all, on the Quidditch pitch, Harry cannot be considered a teacher, as teachers cannot play Quidditch. For those purposes, he must be considered a student. Secondly, people should not be prosecuted for what they could have done, but simply what they did. Mr. Malfoy admitted cheating to try to win the match, but denied any intent to cause permanent damage to Harry. If Harry had in fact been permanently damaged, then expulsion would be in order. I know you believe—"

"It's not what I believe, it's what I heard," she interrupted. "I heard him say that he hoped that Harry would end up, quote, sounding like one of those house-elves he likes so much, unquote. That sounds like intent to me."

“Unfortunately, Pansy, that is simply talk, and cannot be prosecuted. To take a further example, after Hugo Brantell’s first visit here, he told me that he was sure that Mr. Malfoy would kill Harry if he thought he could get away with it. You told Harry the same thing, based on your observations of Mr. Malfoy. Should I have expelled him for that? It would be prudent, it would protect Harry. But I could not. Now, there is apparently a better reason, but I must do what I would do if he were any other student. Expulsion, you must realize, is an extremely harsh and final sanction. It requires the highest standard of proof, having such a strong impact on a person’s future. We cannot fill in the blanks around Mr. Malfoy’s actions with what we feel sure is true; it can only be things we know are true, and can prove. And on the basis of what can be proved, his actions do not merit expulsion.”

“His past doesn’t count for anything at all?” Pansy demanded.

“Except for the incident with the Skiving Snackboxes, Mr. Malfoy does not have a record of disciplinary problems.”

Pansy was still angry. “I could spend the next three hours telling you stories about things he’s done that are not only against the school rules, but cruel and abusive as well.” She paused. “But I suppose you’ll tell me that since it’s nothing official, or provable, it can’t be considered either.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I know it is frustrating. It would be so easy to make small exceptions, especially when we are sure we are right. But proper legal rules must protect the guilty as well as the innocent. It cannot be otherwise. If we start bending the rules to prosecute the guilty, the innocent will suffer as well. History is replete with examples of what happens when we start down that path. Surely you can recall such occasions from your History of Magic classes.”

Pansy shook her head. “I can barely keep awake in that class. I’ve done a lot of daydreaming, though.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows, and looked at Harry, who also shook his head. “Hermione’s the only one who can concentrate enough. She was our designated note-taker.”

“Hermione sure must come in handy sometimes,” said Pansy quietly, no doubt remembering the map.

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore, looking dismayed. “I shall have to check into this further, perhaps encourage Professor Binns to make his lectures more accessible. History is a very important, though admittedly less than practical, subject. But you may take my word for it that when we start making concessions to expediency, we head down a dangerous road.”

Pansy sighed. “If you say so, sir. It’s just hard for me to see that right now. I guess this is the kind of thing the person who has your job has to think about.”

“Not only my job, Pansy, I hope. The more people there are who are aware of this sort of thing, the better off our society is. Now, as for Mr. Malfoy, his punishment is as follows. Firstly, he is no longer a member of the Slytherin Quidditch team, and will not be until and unless he undergoes a remarkable change in attitude. Secondly, he will be given twenty hours of detention. As you have noted, Harry, this does not seem to be a deterrent to him, but it should be done for symbolic reasons.

“Lastly, he will temporarily take up residence in different quarters. From now until the Christmas break, he will reside in one of the guest rooms, most recently used by Dean and Seamus. He will stay in the room when not in classes, his meals delivered to him. He will not be allowed visitors.” Pansy’s expression indicated her relief. “Yes, you will not have to keep up many pretenses to Mr. Malfoy for the next several weeks,” agreed Dumbledore.

“Well, sir,” said Harry, “it certainly sounds like you did the most you could do without expelling him. I appreciate the effort.”

“I also made sure that he understood that any violation of the terms of his sanctions, or other breaking of rules, would be met with immediate expulsion.”

“Well, you can bet he’ll be on his best behavior, then,” said Pansy grimly. “He’ll wait until after Christmas, and then figure out a way to take his best shot at Harry. I’ve gotten the impression lately that he doesn’t plan on graduating from

Hogwarts—nothing specific, just lots of little things he’s said—and I think he’ll gather some of his father’s Dark Arts collection, and come back here and figure out a way to use it against Harry and not get caught, or escape. You’ll have to search his bags when he comes back. You’ll also have to search Crabbe’s and Goyle’s, too.” She saw the expression on Dumbledore’s face, and her face fell. “You won’t search Crabbe and Goyle, because they haven’t done anything wrong.”

Dumbledore nodded. “In addition, Pansy, things come by mail every day. To perform such searches as would be necessary would turn Hogwarts into a virtual police state. Police states are usually very safe, but people do not wish to live in them.”

“I know... but his father’s got lots of stuff, and Malfoy’ll have no reason to hold back anymore. I guess I’ll have my work cut out for me. It’s just... Harry’s in real danger, sir. I just want him to be safe.”

“No more than I do, I assure you. Pansy, has Harry ever told you that I love him?”

Harry smiled, a little embarrassed. “It didn’t come up in conversation.”

“He said you and he were very close,” Pansy said. “He said a lot about you, and it was obvious he has strong feelings for you. But he didn’t say how it went in your direction.”

“It happened little by little,” Dumbledore said. “I felt a little guilty for sending him to live, after his parents were killed, with his relatives. I knew they disliked magic, and were not particularly kind or loving people. When he came to Hogwarts, he very quickly showed the courage and determination of a person far beyond his years. I could not help but admire him as he faced one trial after another, and was equal to them all. As I have told Harry, I could not even say when it happened, but at some point, Harry became as dear to me as any friend or close relative. I would readily give my life to save his. So believe me when I tell you, Pansy, that anything I do which tends to endanger Harry, I do with great reluctance because I feel I must.”

Despite her experiences with Harry, Pansy was still not used to people opening up to her in this way. Filled with emotion, she nodded. “I understand, sir. I guess it must be hard for you, caring so much about Harry but needing to do your job, too.”

“It is not easy, I admit. I should be used to it by now, it seems, but it is never easy.”

Pansy looked at Dumbledore with admiration. “When I was getting to know Harry, back in September, early on he told me lots of personal things about himself. It really surprised me. Now I wonder if it’s something he picked up from you.”

Harry smiled. “I’m not even sure, to tell you the truth. It wouldn’t surprise me, though.”

“Another thing, sir,” added Pansy. “All my life, I’ve been used to parents, teachers, whoever, giving instructions and never bother explaining. They’d say ‘this is how it’s going to be,’ and that was that. Not only did you explain it, you really wanted me to understand it, it was important to you. That’s pretty amazing to me, and I really respect it. Thank you, sir.”

Dumbledore tilted his head in acknowledgment. “A common courtesy, unfortunately too uncommon. I may be a headmaster and you a student, but your feelings are no less important than mine. They, and your safety and Harry’s, are very much at issue, so you deserve to be as fully involved in events as possible.”

“And sir, thank you for yesterday. It really helped.” Harry looked at her blankly as Dumbledore nodded his acknowledgment. “I took your advice, and came to see him yesterday,” she said to Harry. “You were right, he was really helpful.”

“I was very glad to be able to be of help, Pansy,” said Dumbledore.

“Well, I suppose we should get going,” said Harry. “The others are waiting for me in Hogsmeade... are you going?” he asked Pansy.

“Well, I was going with him, but now, I’m not sure. I might go in for a bit, but now my day is kind of free. Maybe I’ll go spend some time with the first years.”

“Good idea,” Harry said. “Listen, Pansy... again, I’m really grateful for what you did. The fact that I worry about you doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate it. Thank you.”

“I was so happy to be able to do it, Harry. It’s what I got into this for. So when’s our next meeting? We still have to be careful, but it’ll be a lot easier now.”

“How about 4:00 on Monday, usual place?”

She nodded. “Okay, see you then. Professor, thank you again.”

“You’re very welcome. Pansy, Harry, please enjoy yourselves.”

They left, and quickly went in different directions so as not to be seen together. Harry went straight out the castle entrance, and on into Hogsmeade.

Harry thought he would have to look around from shop to shop to find the others, but he ran into Ron and Hermione quickly on the main road. “Where’s Neville?” Harry asked.

“He wanted to do some Christmas shopping, he’s in the Owl Order Office,” said Hermione. “So, what did you hear from Dumbledore?”

Harry related all that had happened. “So Pansy’s not happy about Malfoy not getting expelled, but she’s really happy that she was able to help me.”

“Good thing she went to Dumbledore, you’d have shaken it off and not done anything about it,” Ron said, “and we’d be in the infirmary trying to get you to identify a ball and a pen.”

“That’s not funny, Ron,” Hermione chastised him.

He looked at her quizzically. “I wasn’t trying to be. I was saying he’d have ended up badly, and should take threats more seriously.”

“Oh. Well, all right, then. Let’s go join Neville at the Owl Order Office. I’m going to look through their catalogs and find something really nice for Pansy. She deserves it.”

“Good idea, that’s very nice of you, Hermione,” agreed Harry. “I need to go there too.”

“Well, I’d go there, but it’s kind of depressing if you don’t have money to spend,” said Ron. “Why don’t I just go to the Three Broomsticks and meet you there after you’re done?” They agreed to do that, and Ron walked off.

When he was sure Ron was out of their hearing range, Harry said to Hermione, “I wish I could just give Ron a bag of Galleons, but I know he’d never take it.”

She looked at him knowingly. “If your positions were reversed, Harry, neither would you.”

“This is one of those ‘I hate it when you’re right’ situations,” said Harry. “No, I wouldn’t. But I still wish he would.” They walked on in silence for a minute. “Hermione, I have a question. In wizarding history, can you think of any times when bad things happened when well-intentioned people started bending laws and rules in the name of expediency?”

“Sure, there’s been lots of times like that. Probably the most famous is the series of events that led to the schism with the centaurs back in 1388. Prior to that, some centaurs lived in close proximity to humans, and had similar rights. Now, some people got it in their heads that...” She suddenly eyed him appraisingly. “Are you really interested in this?”

He shrugged lightly. “Not every last detail, but the general outline, yes. Professor Dumbledore was disappointed that Pansy or I couldn’t think of any situations like that. I’d like to be able to tell him I know of at least one.”

Amused, she asked, “Now do you wish you’d paid more attention in History of Magic?”

“Like Pansy said, it’s a major accomplishment not to fall asleep in History of Magic,” Harry said defensively.

“Okay... anyway, some people decided that the centaurs were responsible for the spread of a disease that was going around...” She kept talking until well after they were in the Owl Order Office. Harry found, to his surprise, that he was actually interested.

They met Neville in the office, and Harry told him the major details of the meeting with Dumbledore, leaving out any mention of Pansy. “He wasn’t even listening?” asked Neville in amazement, smiling. “Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy...” Harry was not inclined to slap Neville’s wrist for his indulgence in Schadenfreude.

Harry had been talking to Neville for a few minutes when Hermione, across the room, motioned Harry over. He came, and she showed him a catalog from a rare goods shop. “Look, this is perfect!” she said.

To Harry’s surprise, he was familiar with what she was pointing at. It was a set of two small notebooks which people could use to communicate in writing over a distance. Harry could not look at them without a twinge of regret that he had never used the one that Sirius had given him; they were not exactly the same, but similar. “You think I should use them with her?” asked Harry.

“No, Harry, I don’t mean you. You meet with her a lot already. I’m talking about me. She could use it in her dormitory on her bed at night, it would give her another person to talk to. What do you think?”

Harry didn’t know what to think, exactly. On the one hand, Pansy would probably welcome another person to talk to. On the other hand, she and Hermione weren’t exactly similar types. But then again, neither are Ron and Hermione, and they get along, so I shouldn’t discourage her, he thought. “I think it’s very nice of you. I have to think she’d appreciate it and welcome it.”

She smiled, but looked concerned. “I hope so, Harry, but I just found a problem. I didn’t see the price at first. Look at that, fifty Galleons! After my Christmas shopping, I’ve only got a little over twenty left... Harry, maybe Ron won’t take money from you, but I will. What do you think?”

“Well, I’m definitely inclined to be generous to someone who may have saved me from brain damage. Tell you what, why don’t you let me pay for the whole thing.”

“Oh, Harry, you don’t have to, I can always get more money from my parents...”

He leaned over, close to her. “Hermione, do you know what I get paid for being a teacher?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, that’s right, you get paid! I forgot about that! You never mentioned it!”

“I didn’t think about it myself, until I got the first pay at the end of September. After that, I didn’t say anything because of Ron, I didn’t want it to sound like bragging..”

She nodded. “I can understand that. So, how much is it?”

“Three hundred and fifty Galleons a month.”

“Wow! That’s really good! I read that the average salary for British wizards is two hundred eighty-eight Galleons a month, and you don’t even have expenses!”

He nodded. “And I’ve got quite a lot of gold in my vault. I may have a lot of problems in my life, Hermione, but money isn’t one of them. So, just let me pay for this, okay?”

“I withdraw my objections, Harry. You may pay for it. After they arrive, we’ll set up another meeting with Pansy so I can give hers to her and explain how they work.”

Fortunately, Harry had brought most of his gold-on-hand into Hogsmeade, so he had no trouble paying. He took a few catalogs so he could look for gift ideas later that night, then all three left to meet Ron at the Three Broomsticks, where they ate, drank butterbeer, talked, and reveled in the morning’s victory. Upon their return to Gryffindor Tower, they joined the victory party in progress, except for Hermione, who slipped away unnoticed early on. People praised and teased Dennis, who looked like he’d never enjoyed himself so much. Harry remembered feeling like that after his first capture of the Snitch, and he was very happy for Dennis. Eventually, he went up to his dormitory bed and spent an hour looking through the catalogs, deciding what to order the next day. Finally, he went to sleep. It had been a very good day.

CHAPTER 15

HOGSMEADE

Harry slept in the next morning, waking up at 10:30. Fawkes was there, on his new perch, next to Harry's bed. "Good morning, Fawkes," said Harry, and reached up and petted him for a minute. He got dressed and left the empty dormitory; as he turned to go, Fawkes flew over and landed on Harry's shoulder. "Feel like getting outside today?" he asked facetiously, knowing Fawkes could go anywhere he wanted, anytime, not needing Harry to do it.

Harry went to the Great Hall and met his friends at their usual area of the Gryffindor table. They said hello to him and to Fawkes as he sat down. "So, when he does this, it's usually for the whole day, isn't it?" asked Ron.

"So far, yes," Harry agreed. "It's nice to have him along."

"That'll turn a few heads in the Three Broomsticks, Harry Potter and his phoenix," Ron pointed out.

Harry shrugged. "Imagine what my life would be like if I let things like that bother me," he said. "I'd never get out of bed in the morning."

"Guess I hadn't thought of it that way," Ron conceded. "I suppose most of the time it doesn't occur to me that you're, you know, Harry Potter."

"And that's probably one reason I'm comfortable with you guys, that you don't think of that. Going into Hogsmeade... I mean, it's fun, but there are a lot more reminders that I'm Harry Potter there. Sometimes I almost dread graduating from Hogwarts, because out in the real world, I'll get treated much more as Harry Potter, and less whoever I really am."

“There should be some place where you can go to get trained as a celebrity,” said Hermione sympathetically. “But look at it this way, Harry... thank goodness there aren’t tabloids in the wizarding world like there are in the Muggle world.”

Harry cringed at the thought. “I don’t even want to think about that.”

“But we have tabloids, like the Quibbler,” Ron pointed out.

“These are a whole different thing, Ron,” explained Hermione. “One of the big things they do is report on, or should I say, gossip about, celebrities’ lives, usually with a fair bit of fiction mixed in. Also, they’re daily. If there was a magical version of that type, they’d never stop writing about Harry, and it wouldn’t be anything he’d like.”

“Harry Potter’s Ten Tips To Attract a Phoenix,” Harry joked.

“Yes, something like that,” agreed Hermione. “Or last year, you and Cho... ‘Potter girlfriend seen storming out of café crying, Hogsmeade abuzz...’ imagine that.”

“I’m trying not to,” Harry said. “I will say that if you’re trying to make me feel not so hard put about being a celebrity, you’ve succeeded.”

“Thank you, Harry. By the way, have you heard from the Aurors lately?”

“Yes, a few. I got a letter from Cassandra Banks the other day. She said that they’re all trying so hard to focus on love that she’s never seen a more peaceful group of Aurors. No one’s managed the spell yet, though. Apparently Kingsley thought he had it last week, had it tested, and failed.”

“Ouch,” said Hermione, wincing.

“Yeah, I kind of winced, too. At least I had the benefit of not being able to do anything about it, but they’re choosing to try it. Cassandra said that they’ve had such a hard time that by now they would have concluded that it was something unique to me, if not for the fact that Dumbledore can do it too. They really want to get this. I feel bad that I can’t do more to help them.”

“They may just need more time, Harry. You were trying to focus on love way back in August, when we started the Occlumency lessons. Also, you may have discovered it, but that doesn’t make it your fault if they can’t learn it.”

“Yeah, I know. Dumbledore’s tried to help them too. Anyway, she said they want to ask me to visit them at their training center at the beginning of Christmas vacation. Said they’d be testing and picking my brains every day if it wasn’t for my job and my studies.”

“You know, there’s been one nice side benefit of all this. You already have a relationship with them, so when you become an Auror, you’ll know them already.”

“Yeah, that is nice,” agreed Harry. “But, and I’m trying to overcome my modesty to tell you this, they—“

”And we appreciate that you’re trying so hard not to annoy us,” she interrupted.

“Yes, thank you, anyway, some of them act like I’m one of them already, since they know I want to be one. Dumbledore told them about my 100, and combining that with the new spell, Fawkes, and the Voldemort thing, they assume it’s in the bag. It does embarrass me—I mean, I haven’t earned anything yet—but it is nice to have them treat me like that.”

“The good thing about that,” said Ron, “is that the things they’re impressed by have nothing to do with you being Harry Potter. You must like that, too.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, exactly. I’m happy about that. So much comes my way because I’m Harry Potter that I kind of assume that some things are that way even when they’re not.”

“Yes,” said Hermione, “kind of like, someone walks up to you on the street, and you think it’s because you’re Harry Potter and they might want an autograph, and then it turns out they just wanted directions.”

“Yes, something like that. Of course, then I’d feel pretty stupid.”

Neville walked in and sat down. “Hey, Neville,” Harry said, “do you think you’d still want to be friends with me if I wasn’t Harry Potter?”

Neville looked very caught off guard, as if it were a trick question. “But then you wouldn’t be you, would you? You’d be someone else.”

Harry and Ron exchanged a look. “Hard to argue with that,” Ron said.

“I wouldn’t want to try,” Harry agreed. He went back to his food.

Hermione looked exasperated. “What Harry means, Neville, is what if—“

Neville broke into a smile. “If it was Harry’s personality and appearance but his name wasn’t Harry Potter, I know. I was just having some fun.”

Harry and Ron now exchanged startled looks. Hermione gaped at Neville, who laughed shyly. Harry smiled and said, “Very good, Neville, you definitely got us. But it almost wasn’t fair, because you’ve never done that before. Next time, we’ll be on the lookout for it.”

Neville chuckled. “Anyway, your question... I think so, Harry. I mean, like most people, for a while I was impressed that you were Harry Potter, but if you live in the same dormitory with someone for a while, you get used to them. I can’t remember the last time I thought, wow, this is Harry Potter! Now I just associate the name to your personality, while most people just think of the Boy Who Lived.”

A fleeting look of annoyance crossed Harry’s face before he answered. “I guess that makes sense.”

Hermione had caught the look. “You’ve never cared for being known as the Boy Who Lived, have you, Harry? I mean, I think you really don’t like the phrase.”

Harry considered. “I think I use it kind of sarcastically when I do. Like, when Malfoy tried to ambush me over the summer, I taunted him by saying that the Boy Who Lived was back in favor at the Ministry. I think I was kind of criticizing the idea that people treat me a certain way because of that. I’m not sure why I should think it’s such a bad thing, now that I think about it, but I think I’ve never been happy about it.”

“Maybe it’s because your status as the Boy Who Lived makes people treat you in ways that make you uncomfortable?” Hermione suggested.

“Could be,” Harry said. “It may go back to the idea of not feeling deserving of that kind of attention.”

“I know,” said Ron, as if he’d just had a brilliant idea. “Let’s talk about Quidditch!”

“I think you’re focusing too much on Quidditch, Ron,” said Hermione impatiently.

“Do you not like this topic, Ron?” asked Neville curiously. “I think it’s interesting.”

Hermione scoffed. “Ron doesn’t like anything to do with emotions, or how people think, or anything that would make him think about things like that.”

Ron looked irritated. “Maybe a bit, but I just got isolated on the topic. Last year, Harry was with me on this. Now, he isn’t. It’s all your fault,” said Ron with pretended annoyance, speaking last to Harry.

“Sorry, Ron... I just had to be able to sleep at night.”

Neville looked at Harry. “So, why would you feel undeserving, Harry?”

Harry told him much the same thing he’d told Pansy. He concluded by saying, “I especially feel that way when I think about you, Neville. I mean, I got all this sympathy and affection, because my parents were killed, but look at yours. Yours suffered worse than mine; at least with mine, it was over quickly. But you don’t get this kind of sympathy, this kind of attention. You deserve it at least as much as I do, maybe more.”

Ron, Hermione, and Harry were all looking at Neville, wondering what he would say. His parents’ fate didn’t come up often as a topic of conversation. Neville looked uncomfortable for a second, then looked at Harry.

“I’m sure we weren’t the only ones. Lots of other kids had to have lost their parents. In some ways, you’re kind of a symbol for those of us who did. But I do get sympathy, if not nearly as much as you. Mainly from people my gran knows, but even sometimes from people she barely knows that we run across in public, people who knew my parents. They say nice things about my parents, say how sorry they

were about what happened. I have a feeling that they're more uncomfortable, though, than people are with you. With you, yours are dead, that's final, simple. Mine are insane, still alive, but gone in any way that matters." Harry, Ron, and Hermione's expressions all turned pitying without their even realizing it. "So they can't talk about them as if they're dead, but they can't ask how they're doing, either. It's uncommon enough that people don't know what to say. They end up looking at me a lot like you're looking at me right now."

"I'm sorry, Neville," said Hermione, "but I don't see how we could do anything else. Of course we feel bad for you, just like we do for Harry."

"I know the one you mean, Neville," said Harry. "Believe me, I've seen it a lot too. First I get the 'Oh my God, it's Harry Potter,' then the stare at the forehead, but then I get that look too. Is that why you didn't tell anyone here for a long time?"

Neville nodded; Harry could tell he was... not exactly happy to talk about it, but that it felt good to do so, with people he could trust. "I knew what reactions I'd get, and I'd already seen enough of that. Not to mention what people like Malfoy... can you imagine what I'd have heard from him if he'd known all this time? 'Hey, Longbottom, how's the folks?'" Neville looked angry just at the thought. "I couldn't deal with that."

Harry nodded. "It would've been bad. I remember last year, you charging Malfoy because he made a crack about people in St. Mungo's."

"I'm still not happy that you stopped me," Neville said forcefully.

"Neville, Crabbe and Goyle would have pounded you."

Neville looked defiant. "There are some things worth being pounded for, Harry. I'd think that you of all people would understand that."

Harry nodded sadly. "I do. I'm sorry I stopped you, Neville."

Neville nodded his thanks. "You saw at St. Mungo's how Gran is, how she was unhappy that I hadn't told people, that I hadn't told you. The fact is, I should have trusted you by then, you three at least. It's just not something you bring up, out of the blue. But Gran doesn't understand about people like Malfoy. She doesn't

realize that what won't bother her will bother an eleven-year-old. I've never been ashamed of my parents. I am proud of them, especially now that I know they might have been trying to save me. But that doesn't mean I have to go announcing it to everyone. Not everyone will understand." He looked at each one. "But I am sorry I didn't tell you earlier."

Ron spoke first. "Believe me, Neville, no one feels like you did anything wrong. I'm sure I'd have done the same if I were you. You had a bad enough situation."

Harry and Hermione nodded. "Neville, do you know how many times I've done this," Harry said as he moved his hair down to cover his scar, "to try to avoid being recognized? In fact... I never told you guys this before, but..." He told them about how at the beginning of his third year he'd lied to the Knight Bus operators, telling them he was Neville. The other three all laughed, Neville hardest of all.

"Well, it was nice of you to think of me, Harry," Neville finally said. "I probably wouldn't have found it so funny then, but it's hilarious now, I'm not sure why."

Harry smiled. "I'm glad you got a laugh out of it. Of course, at that time I was trying not to be recognized because I thought I was in trouble, but usually it was because I didn't want to be fawned over, or because I didn't want the reactions that you were trying to avoid here. So I would never blame you for that."

"Thanks," Neville said, "but you shouldn't have had to find out like you did."

"Neville," Hermione said hesitantly, "you go there every Christmas, right?" Neville nodded. "How does that feel? I mean, it seems like it might be really depressing."

Neville breathed deeply. "It has been, sometimes. But Gran has what I think is the right attitude about it. She says we go there to honor them, to let their spirits know we care about them, wherever they are. Yes, it is a reminder of what happened to them, but it probably isn't any worse than visiting a cemetery. People

talk to gravestones as if the people could hear them, and maybe they can. I talk to my parents, knowing they can't hear me in one way, but probably can in another."

Harry felt emotion rising up, and noticed he wasn't the only one. Ron looked unusually somber, obviously trying to keep control. Tears were already trickling down Hermione's cheeks. Seeing this, Neville stood up. "I think I've eaten as much as I need to, got to leave some room for candy," he said with a small smile. "Let's go on into Hogsmeade." The others all got up, and they walked out of the Great Hall. As they did, Harry saw Neville and Hermione put their arms around each other for a moment, as if each realized that the other needed to be comforted.

They had a good time, as they usually did in Hogsmeade. They went to the usual places: Honeydukes, where they all got candy, and the Three Broomsticks, where Fawkes did in fact draw a lot of attention Harry's way. They stayed for a couple of hours, drinking butterbeer and talking about their classes, Harry talking about the classes he was teaching as well as taking. Hermione recalled Sirius having said that the Three Broomsticks would have made a better spot than the Hog's Head to have their meeting last year, and said that she doubted that twenty-six people having a meeting there would have been inconspicuous. Harry found it hard to disagree.

Unsurprisingly, they saw many people they knew. Harry walked over at one point to a table of Gryffindor third years, to congratulate Dennis again on his Quidditch performance. Harry also knew that his visit would make Dennis proud in front of his peers, which was another reason he did it. As he walked back to his table, he found himself saying hello or stopping at almost every other table. He realized that now that he was a teacher, and had taught for two months, he now knew most everyone in the school; it was only the seventh years that he had never taught nor been in class with. It was a strange feeling, but a good one; it made him feel more connected to the whole school.

As they walked out it was mid-afternoon, and the weather, so nice yesterday, was getting cooler and cloudy. Ron suggested a stop at Zonko's, but the others weren't interested; neither Hermione nor Neville had ever been practical jokers, and Zonko's didn't have as much appeal to Harry as it used to. Harry wondered whether it was because he was older, or because he was a teacher. Ron shrugged and they continued walking.

They went into the Owl Order Office, and Harry and Ron placed their Christmas orders. Neville and Hermione, having already done so the previous day, looked at catalogs and chatted. After they were done, they went back out to the road, and continued walking until the end. Harry, Hermione, and Ron recalled the time they'd met Sirius there and followed him up the hill to have a private chat, and told Neville about it. They ended up standing around, talking about Sirius and the events of their third year, for almost a half hour. Neville, never having heard the stories before, was fascinated.

"So, you saved your own life?" Neville asked Harry as he started back down the road.

"In a way, yes; the later me saved the earlier me," said Harry.

"But shouldn't the earlier you have died, and then because of that, there would be no later you?" Neville asked. It was a good question, Harry thought. He had wondered that very thing before.

"You'd think so, Neville," Harry agreed. "I don't know how it works, to be honest."

"You think it's going to rain, Harry?" asked Ron. "It's starting to get pretty dark for this early in the afternoon."

"Yeah, I think so too," Harry agreed. "Well, we're just about done here anyway. I was just thinking about getting some butterbeer to take back for the first and second years, who can't come here."

"Oh, that's a very nice thought, Harry," said Hermione. "I'm sure they'll—"

She was interrupted by Fawkes, who suddenly lifted off Harry's shoulder and flew ahead, emitting a loud burst of song. It was almost startling in its surprise and intensity.

"What in the world—" Harry started, then stopped as he heard screaming. Some people screaming in terror, some in pain, most of it coming from the general direction of the Three Broomsticks. It's happened, he thought. Hogsmeade is under attack. "Come on!" he yelled. "We have to get to the nearest building, get some cover! We can't be out in the open like this!"

They started running; Harry couldn't recall ever running faster. As he ran, he saw bolts of what looked like lightning lance along the street, hitting one person, then another. People were yelling and running, and some were on the ground. Harry and the others had almost reached the nearest building when a man jumped out in front of Harry, barely fifteen feet away. Harry instantly Stunned him silently, as the others did with their voices, but the man managed to get off the words "Avada Kedavra!" before he was blasted back. The green bolt flew at Harry, who knew immediately that he was as good as dead. But just before the curse could reach him, Fawkes dove in front of him and, as he had for Dumbledore in the Department of Mysteries, swallowed the curse and burst into flames.

It took Harry a second to adjust to the fact that he was not dead, so sure had he been that it would happen. He reflexively looked around to check for further immediate danger, then bent down to check Fawkes, who looked much like a newly hatched chick. Harry quickly but gently picked him up and moved him to the building's outer wall, so he would be safer; it would be too risky to carry him, what with the lightning.

Harry turned around and saw the other three; Neville spoke, then the other two, looking utterly grim, nodded. Harry walked up to them. "We've got to get to the people doing the lightning. Let's go ahead, one building at a time. Neville, Ron, keep checking behind you to make sure no one sneaks up on us. Go!" They ran up to the next building, lining up against its wall, again taking cover.

Now that they were closer, they saw two people emitting the lightning, which Harry now saw looked more like lightning infused with fire. That could do a lot of damage, he quickly thought. He and Hermione leaped out and Stunned them both, sending them sprawling. “Dammit, where’s that security?” he said aloud, in frustration. Hermione shushed him, pointing out two more people who had come from the sides of the nearest buildings and were walking calmly down the street.

“Hermione! Let’s get them!” he whispered urgently, as Neville and Ron continued to check their backs.

“Are they the enemy?” she asked, worried. “They could be security!”

Harry shook his head. “If they were security, they’d be running, not walking. C’mon!” They ran over and took down these two just as lightning started pouring from their wands. They turned to see Ron and Neville silently Stun another, who had come up from behind them.

Harry shouted for them to advance to the next building; he could think of nothing to do but try to clean them out, one building at a time. They ran forward, and reaching it, found Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley already taking cover against the wall.

“Harry!” Justin whispered as they arrived. “What the hell is going on?”

A dozen voices screamed, this time, all in terror. “Look!” said Hermione.

They all looked up into the sky, and saw the Dark Mark, the symbol of an attack by Voldemort or those under his command. “There’s your answer, Justin,” Harry said quickly. “Voldemort. This is because of me.” Saying it made him feel sick inside, but he made himself postpone any other concern but stopping Voldemort’s minions.

He saw Hermione nod. “They already tried Avada Kedavra on Harry once,” she told Ernie and Justin. “Fawkes dove and took it for him, but he can’t do it again.” Harry saw a look of dread cross Justin’s face.

“Look, there’s five over there, two buildings down!” Harry gestured to where lightning was being released, although there were few people remaining in

the streets. "I assume everyone's ready with their shield." Five heads nodded. "Let's go get them, Ron and Neville, watch our sides." Harry in the lead, they ran out into the street.

The five Harry had indicated were fortunately not assiduous in watching their backs, and Harry's group took them down with little difficulty. Just as they did, two others who had better cover behind trees pointed their wands at the group, and lightning burst forth, directly at them.

"Protego!" shouted five voices; Harry again did his silently. The fire-imbued lightning bounced between the six harmlessly. Ron and Neville took out one of the latest two, while Ernie and Justin took the other. Harry looked down the street toward Hogwarts and saw Albus Dumbledore a hundred yards away, running in their direction, casting spells as he went. Thank God, it's almost over.

Sudden dread took him over as he heard the words "Avada Kedavra!" again, from behind him. Knowing that it was useless, he reflexively turned toward the sound of the voice, and saw the green bolt headed for him again, as if in slow motion. He knew he had no time to dodge. It had covered half the distance from the attacker to him when Harry suddenly heard a voice shout "Stupefy!" and a group of voices shout "Diffusial!" He filled with horror as he realized what was being done. He started to turn, to try to stop them, but it was too late. The last thing he saw was the bolt split into separate lines just a few inches in front of him.

Harry could not recall feeling so tired. He was not capable of any thought other than that he needed more sleep. He could not even manage to open his eyes, or move at all. He was starting to wonder what had happened when he drifted off to sleep again.

Harry was aware of himself again, but barely, and still disoriented. He fought to awaken, but felt as though he were at the bottom of a pool, having to

swim upward. It seemed as though something was blocking his return to consciousness. He drifted; for how long he did not know.

Finally, he felt himself coming to the surface, and was able to open his eyes, though not much. He recognized the infirmary, and that he was on one of its beds. He could not see the other beds, or anything but a figure near his bed with blond hair, looking across the room. He couldn't see her face, but he couldn't imagine who else it could be. "Pansy?" he tried to say, but his voice cracked, and it barely came out.

She whirled to face him. "Harry!" she shrieked, and bent down over him. He saw delight and vast relief in her eyes. "Oh, thank goodness, oh, Harry..." She held his face in her hands. "It's okay, Harry, you're going to be okay."

"What happened?" he managed to ask, still disoriented.

She looked suddenly concerned. "Hogsmeade, Harry..." It struck Harry like a metal ball in the stomach; it all came back to him.

"The others?" he asked, eyes wide and fearful, dreading what he might hear.

She looked dismayed. "They're still unconscious. They're not dead, don't worry. The fact that you came back means they still might. You got the least of it, you remember how the Diffusion Shield works."

"How long...?"

"A little over two days. It's just past midnight Tuesday, so early Wednesday morning. That reminds me." She took out her Galleon, pushed its edge at twelve o'clock, and pressed the center. "I took your Galleon and gave it to Ginny. She wanted me to call her as soon as you came around. We've been worried sick."

"How have you... are you out in the open?"

"No, Dumbledore and McGonagall have arranged it so I can stay overnight without being seen. Ginny's been here most of the days."

Harry tried to sit up, with marginal success. Pansy helped him to a sitting position, holding him in her arms. "But they're going to be okay?" he asked.

“They don’t know, Harry. They think so, but they just don’t know. This kind of thing has barely ever happened before, apparently. No one knows if four people have ever tried to Diffuse a Killing Curse before, so they just can’t say. But like I said, your coming back makes it more likely that they will.”

“Four?” Harry asked, surprised. “Hermione, Ron, Neville...” He trailed off. “Justin,” she said.

Justin? He was amazed. He wouldn’t have thought it. Then suddenly he remembered the lightning, and asked another question to which he dreaded the answer. “Any dead?”

She grimaced, looking at him with profound sorrow. “Four,” she said. She gave their names; he knew them all from his classes, but only from there. Two Ravenclaw third years, a Gryffindor third year, and a Hufflepuff fourth year. “All were in the Three Broomsticks. It was crowded, it was sudden.”

Harry felt his world come crashing down around him. He knew that his life would never be the same again. Four people dead, because of you. Four people dead. His mind nearly shut down, nearly refused to accept it.

He managed to sit all the way up. “Four?” he could only repeat. She nodded, a tear rolling down her face. He felt staggered, not knowing what to do. Then the tears started coming, and he made no effort to stop them. He wailed and buried his head in her shoulder, crying harder than he ever had before. He couldn’t have stopped it if he’d wanted to. He felt adrift in a sea of hopelessness, clinging to Pansy for dear life. There was nothing to do but cry, and he wondered if he could cry enough to get what was in him out.

He was barely aware of the passing of time. In a corner of his consciousness, he noticed that Ginny had come in, but he couldn’t talk to her, couldn’t do anything but continue to cry. Pansy held him tightly as she ran her hands over his head, across his back, desperate to somehow alleviate his suffering.

He finally stopped crying, as much from exhaustion and physical necessity as anything else. Pansy looked into his eyes, and he knew that she was wishing she

could suffer this for him so he wouldn't have to. She kissed him on the forehead and got up so Ginny could sit down next to Harry. Ginny sat and held Harry tightly. "Oh, Harry, we're so happy you're okay."

"I wish I was," Harry said bitterly. "They should have left me alone. If anyone was going to die, it should have been me, not four innocent third and fourth years."

Ginny was trying to hold back her frustration with what he was saying, for his sake. "I've cried for them too. I think we all have. But we don't get to choose that kind of thing. All we can do is the best we can, and that's what you've always done. There's nothing that you've done that you should have done differently. You said we should use his name, and you were right. We can't fight Voldemort if we can't say his name. And if we don't fight him, we're dead, or worse. You did what you had to do."

Harry wanted to, but he couldn't deny the truth of what she was saying. "They didn't ask to take this kind of chance."

"No, they didn't," she agreed. "But innocents are killed in any war, it's a fact of life. Voldemort kills far more innocents than most. You can't blame yourself for leading a fight where innocents are killed, or you can't lead any fights at all. You fight, you lead the fight because the cause is right, because it's necessary. Do you want to sit here and tell me we shouldn't be fighting Voldemort?" She stared at him.

He knew it was true, but somehow it was still of no comfort. He said nothing.

"I've been talking to people, Harry. No one blames you, at least no one I've talked to. All they want is for you and the others to get better, everyone's really concerned for you and them. People don't blame you. You shouldn't."

Harry still said nothing. "And don't even think about wishing you were dead," she said, finally letting some of her annoyance show. "Look at them. They were willing to give their lives for yours. I know that's not what you would have wanted, but it says something about you, not to mention about them. They thought

it was more important that you lived. Do you want to tell them that what they did was for nothing, that they may have given their lives for something that wasn't important? Do you want to tell that to me, to Pansy? Because we would have joined the Diffusion if we could've. I know this isn't what you want to hear. I know you don't think much of your life right now. But we do. Look at what they did. Think about what it means they think of you."

"They planned it..." Harry almost didn't realize he was speaking out loud. He looked at Ginny. "After the first one, I was getting Fawkes to a safe place. I looked back and saw the three of them talking. They must have decided to do this if someone else sent a Killing Curse at me. They knew that Fawkes couldn't protect me again... oh, my God, that's why they told Justin and Ernie. Hermione told them about the first Curse, that Fawkes couldn't help anymore. She was letting them know what they were going to do, to let them join if they wanted, and Justin did."

She nodded. "By the way, Ernie's been in here a lot. He's really been in a state, crying a couple of times, he feels horrible."

"Because he's concerned about Justin?" Harry asked numbly.

She shook her head. "He's concerned, but that's not why he's crying. He's crying because he's angry at himself for not having joined the Diffusion. He Stunned the one who attacked you. He definitely saved your life by doing it. If he had joined the Diffusion, no one would have Stunned the attacker, and he would have just hit you with another Curse while you were on the ground unprotected. Ernie knows that, but he still feels terrible. Because he thinks it was only because of cowardice that he didn't join, and it makes him feel bad about the kind of person he is. He thinks that the fact that what he did helped save you too was just chance.

"Do you know how many people I've talked to who say that they would have joined the Diffusion if they could have? Quite a few, even first years. You aren't going to do anyone any good telling them that their sacrifice would have been for nothing. We need you, Harry, and we need you to do something harder than die. We need you to live, even though others die. If you don't believe that it's important

that you live, you can believe the people who are willing to die for you. It's the least you can do for them."

All true, Harry thought. It was still of little comfort. She could see that in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she continued. "I guess I can't imagine what you're going through. Dumbledore told us that you would feel this way, both feeling responsible for those who died, and wishing that you had died instead. He said it's called survivor's guilt. He's already talked with Ernie, I think it helped a bit. You just have to remember, none of this was your fault. It's Voldemort's fault, it's the fault of those who did it."

Pansy sat down on the chair and took Harry's hand. "You've made sure everyone's aware, Harry, that... Voldemort has to be fought." Even through his grief, it registered with him that this was the first time she had used the name, and that she was doing so to show she meant what she said. Noting his slightly raised eyebrows, she continued, "It's the least I can do. But it's true, Harry. There was nothing else to do but what you did."

Ginny nodded. "And if you blame yourself, then you have to blame Dumbledore. He already said that he's responsible, not you. It's his school, he says, and that makes him responsible for everything that happens. He encouraged you to do what you did, he knew the risks. Do you want to say that this is his fault? Because he's right, if it's your fault, then it's his too."

Harry had no answer for that, either. "It's not his fault," he said.

"That's right," Ginny agreed. "And that means it's not yours, either."

At once, Harry both knew she was right and couldn't accept it. The enormity of the four deaths washed over him again, and again he started to cry. Ginny took him into her arms and held him. He cried for another five minutes, then stayed limp in Ginny's embrace, exhausted.

Ginny looked at Pansy, who nodded, and got up to get something. Ginny gently laid Harry back down onto the bed. Pansy handed Harry a small glass of

clear liquid, and pushed gently on his back from below to prop him up enough so he could drink it. He wasn't sure he wanted to, but they both looked very serious about it, so he acquiesced. He drank the liquid and lay back. He was mercifully asleep again within moments.

Harry awoke, and by the quality of the light, he could tell that it was morning. He felt weak still, but much better than he had last night. He looked up to see Professor Dumbledore sitting at his bedside. "How are you feeling, Harry?"

Harry looked into Dumbledore's concerned eyes, eyes which conveyed the impression that Dumbledore already knew the answer to this question, and to most questions he asked Harry. "Physically, not that bad. I could probably even get up, but I'm sure Madam Pomfrey would have a fit. Mentally... well, you probably know already."

"Ginny and Pansy have told me about your conversation last night. It sounds as though they covered the high points of what you needed to be reminded of," Dumbledore answered. "But having experienced it myself, I know that being reminded once, or even many times, does not make the feelings go away. I wish I could make your feelings go away, but as you know, I cannot. All I can do is remind you of what you know already."

Harry accepted this mutely. He had begun to somewhat accept that he should not obsessively blame himself for the deaths, but he knew that he could never separate himself from them, either.

"You are so young, Harry," Dumbledore said gravely. "Almost too young to bear this kind of burden. I would have seriously considered not allowing you to bear it at all were it not for the fact that you have borne all other burdens placed upon you so well, and that what you are doing is right. You must never forget that. Also, keep in mind that you are only doing it because I allowed you to, even encouraged you to. Do you not think that I knew what you would do when I made you Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher? I knew you would use Voldemort's

name, and I knew that you would encourage the students to do so. I knew you would have far better success than I had had, and that it very well might provoke Voldemort to this kind of action. Your only... culpability in this is that you did what was right. I am ultimately responsible.”

“You always say that,” Harry said, almost annoyed.

“That is because while I am the headmaster of this school, it is always true,” Dumbledore replied. “I cannot escape that. I do not mean to say that I have done anything wrong in allowing you to do as you have done, just that it was my decision.

“I would like to bring you up to speed on a few matters,” he continued. “It may be useful for you to know what has happened while you have not been among us.”

Harry nodded and sat up. “By the way, why weren’t we taken to St. Mungo’s?”

“Most of the wounded were, for treatment for burns. Do not worry, all will recover with no adverse long-term effects. But St. Mungo’s was crowded enough as it was, and we understood that there was nothing they could do for you or your friends. You would either wake up, or not. It was deemed best to leave you here. Madam Pomfrey has been spending most of her time at St. Mungo’s.”

“And I suppose we still don’t know any more about them?” he asked, referring to his friends.

Dumbledore shook his head. “As was the case with you, we will only know when they wake up. While it is not certain that they will, it seems highly likely. I believe that if they were going to die, they would have done so immediately. All we can do is wait.

“Most of the damage was done immediately, in the Three Broomsticks. The nature of the spell used is to inflict the greatest possible damage over a specific, usually crowded, area. Some people in the establishment were fortunate not to be hit by the initial burst, and some reacted very quickly and escaped damage. The attackers were subdued almost immediately, but the damage was done.

“Once order was restored in Hogsmeade, emergency medical and security personnel evacuated all injured to St. Mungo’s via the Owl Office fireplace or by Apparating. Five people were initially in critical condition, but have since recovered somewhat, and will continue to do so. I then returned to Hogwarts to inform the school of the details of what happened, including the status of the dead, injured, and that of you and your friends.

“Yesterday I met with the families of the deceased. They were in shock, of course, and extremely distraught. It may comfort you very little, but you should know that even in their grief, they do not blame you, or even me, for what happened. They understood that this is what Voldemort does, and that it is why he must be fought and defeated. I also visited the wounded at St. Mungo’s. Even the more seriously wounded were very concerned about your situation, and many expressed the belief that you helped save their lives, as have a number of uninjured students here at the school. They credited your early and strong emphasis on the Protection Charm with their ability to either totally or partially block the damage. The fact is that considering what was done, and the age of the victims, four was an amazingly low number of fatalities. I had feared the number could be as high as a few dozen. The spell used by the attackers was chosen, as I said, because it is highly damaging.

“This morning, I spoke during breakfast and was able to inform the school of the recovery of many at St. Mungo’s, and to tell them of your recovery. This news was greeted by what I would describe as a thunderous ovation. I have since been besieged with requests to see you; your Slytherin first years have been especially persistent.”

For the first time since the deaths, Harry couldn’t help but smile, if only a little. “I’ll see them any time you want to send them in,” he said.

“Of course, I will send them in later on. Also, much of the Weasley family is here; they wish to see you, as well as wait for Ron to recover. But there are other things we must discuss first.”

The infirmary door opened, admitting Snape and McGonagall. McGonagall walked over to where Harry was sitting on his bed and took his hand for a moment. “You are all right, Harry?” she asked.

“Getting better,” he replied.

She turned to Dumbledore. “Albus, are you sure this cannot wait until he is more fully recovered?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “He must know, Minerva, and the sooner the better. He must incorporate it into his grief, or he will grieve twice. I know it is a terrible burden, but it is unavoidable.” He turned to Harry. “You said that you did not blame me for what happened in Hogsmeade, Harry. What I am about to tell you may cause you to change your mind.”

Harry flinched internally. What could he possibly say to make me think that? thought Harry. He waited for Dumbledore to continue.

“The attack occurred at 3:45 p.m. on Sunday. On Sunday morning, Voldemort met with Professor Snape and told him of the planned attack, including the timing. He wished Professor Snape to find a way to keep me distracted when the attack started, so I could not come to your aid immediately when the attack began. Professor Snape was able to return to Hogwarts at just before 1:30 p.m., and he immediately informed me of Voldemort’s plans. I told no one but Professor McGonagall. I took no action to prepare for or to prevent what happened.”

Harry literally couldn’t believe what Dumbledore was telling him. He was silent for a half a minute. Finally, he said, “You knew? You could have stopped it and you didn’t?” With extreme sadness, Dumbledore nodded. Harry felt as though he could hardly breathe. “Why?” he managed to get out.

“Because, Harry, the information was too good to use. We had no choice but to assume that Professor Snape was the only way we could have gotten the information, and that Voldemort would know that. If we had done anything to prepare beyond the security precautions we had already taken, Voldemort would

likely have deduced that Professor Snape was the source, and his cover would have been blown. We could not risk that.”

Harry was astounded at what he was hearing; the flaw seemed so obvious. “So what?” he shouted, his grief coming out as anger. “Four people are dead! You said it could have been dozens! How could you possibly... let four people die...” The tears started coming, forcing him to stop talking, to control himself. He put his head in his hands. “I don’t believe it,” he muttered through tears.

Snape moved to the end of the bed and stared down at Harry, eyes flashing furiously. “And I do not believe, Potter, that you can be so selfish, so unthinking. All you know are your own emotions! You know what kind of man the headmaster is. If you would think for a few seconds, you would realize what this has cost him, what he has suffered, and you would not question his judgment until you have heard his reasons. If you love him as you profess, you would not place your feelings above his.”

Harry had stopped crying, so startled was he by Snape’s outburst, especially its emotional content. He would not have assumed that Snape could ever care about or consider such things. He was still trying to work through what Snape had said when Dumbledore spoke again.

“He is still young, Severus,” said Dumbledore gently. “He could not have any reaction but this. I knew this. He is doing the best he can.”

“Harry,” said McGonagall, “the headmaster had no choice. He could make no other decision than the one he made. It was a horribly painful choice, but it was the only one.”

His voice conveying that he desperately wanted to believe that was true, he asked Dumbledore, “Okay, then, please tell me. If you stopped the attack, Professor Snape gets blown, but he’s still safe at Hogwarts. How is that worth four lives? Or dozens?”

“Whether I die is irrelevant, Potter,” said Snape, still sounding angry. “What is relevant is what my death accomplishes. I am perfectly willing to die to bring

about the death of the Dark Lord. Any other use would be a foolish waste of my utility.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Harry, you may not fully understand Professor Snape’s importance to us, to our cause. He is irreplaceable, a priceless asset, our only chance to ever have a spy who has Voldemort’s confidence. His presence very greatly increases our eventual chance of victory against Voldemort.

“In this kind of situation, the larger picture must be considered, even when innocent lives are at stake. Consider what we are fighting for. Voldemort was progressing toward a likely victory fifteen years ago, until your mother’s sacrifice stopped him. He could do so again now. Think of what it would mean if he were to gain unchallenged control over the wizarding world. It would be tyranny, the end of freedom. Muggles worldwide would be made slaves, tortured or given to dementors on the whims of Voldemort’s servants. Thousands would certainly die, perhaps even millions, and life would be made a miserable hardship for those who did not subject themselves to his authority. You have seen him, you know what he is like. Imagine him as being in control of all wizards everywhere.

“This is what we are fighting for, Harry. These are the stakes. They are as high as such stakes can get. We must be prepared to make any sacrifice in order to defeat Voldemort, or there will soon be nothing worth fighting for. Professor Snape is our best chance to accomplish that. We simply cannot consider losing such an asset unless it means a great likelihood of Voldemort’s demise.

“In a case like this, as in all such cases, a decision must be made. Do we sacrifice four lives, or dozens, now, or do we keep an asset that we hope and expect will help us save thousands, not to mention our freedom? As Professor McGonagall said, agonizing though it was, there was no other choice to be made.”

Harry was silent for a moment, the enormity of it sinking in. He knew intuitively that Dumbledore was right, he had to be. He simply hadn’t thought through the massive implications of a Voldemort victory. He put his head in his hands again; it all seemed too much to think about. How could a person weigh four

lives against such stakes? How to tell the victims' loved ones that it was worth it, what the victims had died to unknowingly protect? But he knew Dumbledore, and he knew he had to accept that what Dumbledore was saying was true. And that meant that Snape was right, that he had judged Dumbledore guilty of a terrible act without knowing the facts, and that Harry's judgment would have hurt Dumbledore, reminding Dumbledore only more of the terribly painful decision he had made. Impulsively he stood up, walked over to a wall, and kicked it. It hurt his foot, of course, but he didn't care. He banged the wall with his fist a few times. It didn't seem to do any good.

Dumbledore walked over to him, standing a few feet away from Harry as he leaned into the wall in despair. Harry looked over his shoulder and saw Dumbledore's eyes. He saw pain, not only Dumbledore's own pain for what he had to do, but his pain for what Harry was going through. Harry also saw Dumbledore's love, his forgiveness for how Harry had acted. Equally impulsively, Harry stepped toward Dumbledore and hugged him. Dumbledore hugged him back and patted his shoulder; for some reason that caused Harry to burst out in tears again, as if he didn't feel worthy of forgiveness. Through his sobs, Harry said, "I'm sorry, sir... Professor Snape was right, I wasn't thinking about you, what you had to go through..."

He continued crying as Dumbledore continued to comfort him. "As I said, you are young, Harry. This kind of burden is too much for many mature, grown men to bear. You have nothing to be ashamed of." Harry wasn't sure that was true, but he was glad to hear Dumbledore say it.

Harry cried for another minute, until this bout was out of his system. Harry stepped back, and took a tissue proffered by McGonagall. He blew his nose, then looked up at her. She had a proud yet sad look on her face, with no trace of her usual reserve. To his surprise, she stepped toward him and put her arms around him. He did likewise. As she held him, she said, "It might make you feel better to

know, Harry, that I have held Albus as he has wept for similar reasons, on many occasions.”

Harry was surprised, but realized that he shouldn't have been, knowing Dumbledore's kindness and good heart as he did. “It does, a bit, actually,” he said.

She looked at him kindly as she released him. “There are many men who would not weep, and it is sad for those who follow them.”

He nodded his understanding. Dumbledore spoke again. “Harry, there is one more thing that is important that we do. I would like to ask you to place your recollections of Sunday afternoon into the Pensieve, so that we may go over them. Valuable information could be gained.”

Harry agreed, and Dumbledore moved the Pensieve over. Harry used his wand to move his memories, then said, “This should start as we start back from the end of the main street.” The four of them put their fingers into the Pensieve, and soon Harry was standing on that street, looking at himself talking to Hermione about buying butterbeer for the younger students.

Harry watched the events happen as if for the first time; he realized that the perspective was very different when one wasn't in the actual situation, even though the same events were being viewed. Harry saw Fawkes dive and swallow the first Killing Curse, and himself walk over and put Fawkes in a safer place. Dumbledore smiled at him and said, “It was not necessary, but it was a very thoughtful thing to do.”

McGonagall said, “Harry, did you hear this conversation?” referring to Neville speaking to Ron and Hermione. Harry shook his head.

She motioned him over, and the scene was suddenly where it had been twenty seconds before. Standing near Neville, Harry heard him say, “Fawkes can't do that again, and that probably wasn't the only one looking for Harry. We have to be ready to Diffuse.” He saw Ron and Hermione nod. The scene froze.

“Most impressive,” said Dumbledore. “I had assumed that they had done it on the spur of the moment; I did not know they had planned it. It is quite an amazing thing, to plan to do something so risky.”

“If I had heard, I would have told them not to do it,” Harry said.

“And what do you think they would have done, Harry?” asked McGonagall.

Harry nodded. “Yes, I know, they would have done it anyway. By the way, I didn’t hear them in the situation. How is it we can hear it now?”

“We hear and see many things that do not consciously register, because they are so faint,” Dumbledore explained. “The Pensieve has the effect of enhancing such information.”

The memory started again, and they watched it through to the end without further comment. They then left the Pensieve, and Harry put his memories back.

“I must say, Harry,” said Dumbledore, “that I am impressed, not only with your friends’ bravery, but your tactical instincts. You reacted quickly and decisively, taking charge and giving the proper instructions.”

Harry nodded his acknowledgment. “I just wanted to get those people out of there.”

“You and your group managed to take out quite a few of them,” McGonagall added. “I’m sure the Aurors will be impressed when they see this.”

“Speaking of the Aurors, where were they? I kept expecting security to charge in, and it didn’t happen until the end. Surely they could have reacted faster than they did without compromising Professor Snape’s information.”

“The plan was multi-faceted, Professor,” said Snape, “and I was only told that part which the Dark Lord decided that I needed to be told.”

“At precisely 3:40, an attempt was made on the life of the British Prime Minister,” explained Dumbledore. “It appears that a few Muggles were put under the Imperius Curse by Death Eaters to make the attempt. This caused some Aurors to be dispatched to the scene. Then at 3:43, Death Eaters launched an assault on the holding areas of those captured in June in the Department of Mysteries, freeing

all those held. Aurors were again dispatched, but the Death Eaters managed to escape. An emergency call went out to all Aurors to attempt to track them down, which is why no one was able to be of help in Hogsmeade.”

“So... but those weren’t Death Eaters in Hogsmeade, were they?” Harry asked. “They weren’t very smart, and they only used the one spell. Well, that and the ones that tried to get me.”

“Yes, Harry, those were not Death Eaters, except the ones who tried to kill you. The ones who attacked were random wizards who were kidnapped from various countries from around the world, so there would not be a rash of disappearances in one area that would be more easily noticed. They were put under the Imperius Curse, taught that one spell, and sent out to cause mayhem. To Voldemort, they were what could be called disposable attackers, to be used only once. This is why they had no real tactical abilities. The ones sent to attack you, all three of whom are now in custody, are actual Death Eaters, apparently recent recruits. The Killing Curse is not easy to learn, so Voldemort sent them specifically to seek you out. You only saw two; the third was captured before he could take any action.”

“Too bad they couldn’t have just gotten me, and left the Three Broomsticks alone,” said Harry. McGonagall gave him a reproachful look. “You wouldn’t think that, if it were you?” Harry challenged McGonagall. Her expression softened, and she did not answer.

“Killing you was only one objective, Harry. The other one was terror, hence the Dark Mark as you saw. He wants to be feared. This is an attempt to regain some of what he lost when you defeated him. In any case, it is very fortunate that they did not get you, not only for your own sake. You must understand your own importance. It is difficult to say who is more important to our cause, you or Professor Snape. You are both irreplaceable.”

“If you had to choose one of us, Headmaster, it should be him,” said Snape.

Harry was startled. “Last year in Occlumency,” he said to Snape, “you said I was neither special nor important.”

“That was before the fourth dream,” replied Snape. Harry realized that Snape was referring to the spell that blocked the Cruciatus Curse.

“But that’s not so important, in the scheme of things,” responded Harry. “It’s not the kind of thing that’s going to help us defeat Voldemort.”

“My feeling, Professor Potter, is that that is not the last surprising thing that you will do before this is over,” said Snape. Harry looked at Dumbledore in surprise.

Dumbledore nodded. “That you came up with that spell, Harry, suggested to us that the prophecy meant more than was apparent at first. Our belief is that there is something as yet unknown about you that will be instrumental in bringing about Voldemort’s defeat. We cannot, of course, guess what it might be. We must wait for events to play out. But that is why you are so important.”

“I’m curious, sir... considering that... did Professor Snape have specific information that I would be a target?”

“No, Harry, he did not. But I understood that you probably would be one anyway.”

“In that case... did you give any consideration to suggesting that I not go to Hogsmeade? Not even because of how you feel about me, but because I was so important that I couldn’t be risked?”

Dumbledore nodded. “It is a good question, Harry. In fact, I gave it serious consideration. Of course, you were already in Hogsmeade when I got the information, but I could have attempted to call you back. I did not do so for two reasons. One, it might have given Professor Snape away; it is highly irregular for someone to be called back from Hogsmeade in such a fashion, and attention would have been called to it. Two, what would I have told you? That Hogsmeade would be under attack, and that you should stay safely in the castle? As much as I do not wish to risk your life, I wish to put you in that position even less. Can you imagine the

agony you would have experienced, to have to wait for the attack, knowing it was coming, unable, at my instruction, to come to the assistance of those under attack? I would not do that to you. I consoled myself with the knowledge that your skills are excellent, and not only would you likely survive, you would likely save others in the process. And you did survive, because of the loyalty you inspire. Justin is not even someone you are especially close to, and look what he did.

“It was painful not to call you back. I very much wanted to. But I could not allow my personal feelings to override my judgment. And my judgment was that while you were at risk, Professor Snape was at greater risk if I protected you.”

“I understand, sir. I’m not bothered, believe me. I really was just curious.”

“Professor Potter,” said Snape, “if you would indulge me for a moment, I would like to test your grasp of the ‘big picture.’ If you were analyzing the current struggle, how would you rate Sunday’s events? Which side comes out better, and why?”

Harry’s first thought was that he didn’t want to think about the big picture, that it was somehow a disservice to the memory of those who had died to weigh their deaths against other considerations. He knew that wasn’t right, but he felt it anyway, and struggled to put such thoughts aside. “I keep thinking about those four people, but I know that if I’m going to be involved like this, I’m going to have to look at the big picture better.” He thought for a minute. “How much effort is involved in kidnapping, training, and handling those people they used in Hogsmeade?”

The calculating look on Snape’s face suggested to Harry that he was thinking along the right lines. “Not a small amount. This operation has clearly been the Dark Lord’s main strategic objective since his confrontation with you.”

“Then, the only good thing for them is that they got those Death Eaters back. From their point of view, the Hogsmeade operation has to be considered a failure. Not only did they fail to get me, losing three Death Eaters in the process, but the resources they put into gathering all those disposable attackers seems to say

that they were hoping for a death toll much higher than four. They probably wanted dozens, like Professor Dumbledore was afraid would happen.” He thought again. “Also, it seems to me that the time they spent doing this was time they could have spent doing something else, like gathering even more forces for long-term use. They took a gamble on this, and lost. So I guess I’d say that it’s a big plus for our side.”

Snape looked impressed, as did McGonagall and Dumbledore. “A good analysis, Professor. The last of what you said is the key. Are you familiar with the concept of opportunity cost?” Harry shook his head. “Opportunity cost,” Snape continued, “refers to the fact that when one is doing something, one could be doing something else. If you have tickets for a performance, but choose to spend the evening with a friend instead, the opportunity cost of that visit is that you miss the performance. This operation was costly to the Dark Lord in that sense; he has made very little progress in his strategic objectives in the past seven weeks. And it is highly likely that what he would have done in these seven weeks had he not been doing this would have cost more than four lives. So, in a real sense, almost certainly, lives were saved. And why exactly did he spend the last seven weeks doing this?”

Harry understood this was a rhetorical question, but he answered it anyway. “Because of my campaign to say his name.”

“Correct,” Snape said. “I said at that time that I would not have advised joining that particular fight. I was obviously incorrect. I could not have guessed—though, nor could you, I suspect—that you would so successfully galvanize the Hogwarts community, and begin to have an effect on the wizarding community in general. That he takes this seriously is reflected in his actions. By joining the fight with you, he has diverted time and resources from long-term strategic aims, so your campaign would be considered a success if only for that reason.

“The headmaster would probably give you this advice as well, but it is very important that you keep up your defiant posture in the public arena. You will have to answer the media’s questions. You must emphasize strongly your determination

to continue in your efforts. You must not even hint at any self-blame for the deaths, for if you did—“

”Voldemort would know he was getting to me, that making the body count higher is the way to beat me down,” Harry finished as Snape nodded. “I understand.”

“Needless to say, Harry,” said Dumbledore, “you should not be any less than honest in your interview. Hugo would know if you were. I suppose it is more a matter of emphasis. Hugo will notice that, too, but he will also understand the reasons, and not press the issue.”

“When will this interview be, sir?” Harry asked.

“It has not been determined yet, but I believe he would like to do it as soon as possible, so that his story will be closer to the actual event. I would say that you should do it when you feel ready. But in any case, I would recommend that you first see some of the people who wish to see you. They are most eager.”

“Of course, sir. I want to see them too. You can go ahead and send them in now, if you want.” After so much focus on death and strategy, Harry felt it would be nice to spend some time with people just for the sake of mutual support. McGonagall and Snape left, and a few minutes later, most of the remainder of the Weasley family came in: the parents, Bill, Fred, George, and of course Ginny. Mrs. Weasley gave him her usual hug and kiss; he surprised her by kissing her in return. Everyone expressed their relief that Harry had recovered, but of course it was tempered by concern for the others.

Dumbledore asked Harry to put his memories back in the Pensieve; he wanted the Weasleys to be able to see what happened for themselves. Harry did so, and they all went into the Pensieve to watch. After they were finished and came back out, there was no comment for a moment, just silence. Finally, George said, “Don’t think I’ll be making any jokes about Ron for awhile. That took some guts. I’m not sure I could have done that.”

“It’s almost more impressive that they planned to do it,” agreed Fred. “Risking your life like that on the spur of the moment is one thing. But to choose to take a piece of Avada Kedavra...” He trailed off. “And Neville, being the one to suggest it. I remember when he was deathly afraid to ask someone to borrow a quill. He’s come a long way.”

Mrs. Weasley was tearing up. “I’m very proud of Ron,” she said, “but I can’t help realizing that I would’ve wished he hadn’t done it if it was for anybody but Harry, or another member of the family. I know I shouldn’t feel that way. Risking your life for someone is noble, no matter who it’s for. But a mother can’t help but feel like I do, I suppose.”

“What’s also amazing,” Fred said, “is Justin. I was never aware that he was that close a friend of yours, Harry.”

“He and Ernie were very supportive through the whole Voldemort thing, but otherwise... I was surprised too, to be honest. I have to imagine that he just thought it was the right thing to do. We’ve always been friendly, but never that close.”

“Ernie feels terrible that he didn’t do it too,” Ginny said to Fred and George.

“Don’t see why he would,” said Fred as George nodded in agreement. “Risking your life for a friend even, is a stretch. To do it for someone you don’t know all that well... no one should expect that of himself.”

They walked over to Ron’s bed and talked there. After a while, Harry was very surprised to see the door open and Pansy walk in. He wasn’t concerned, though; he knew all the Weasleys could be trusted. Fred and George’s expressions of surprise turned to shock when, smiling, Harry met her in the middle of the room and hugged her enthusiastically. He chuckled as he hugged her.

“What?” she whispered.

“Look at Fred and George,” he whispered back, turning her around as part of the hug so she could see. He felt her suppress a laugh.

Ginny did actually laugh out loud. “See, guys, a few things have changed...”

“That’d be putting it mildly,” said George. Ginny explained the Pansy situation to Fred and George; they asked her a few questions, then Pansy, and shook their heads in amazement.

“Oh, Harry,” said Pansy, “I wanted to mention that the first years really want to see you. Well, actually, more like pleading, begging, demanding, that sort of thing.”

“Harry has kind of a special relationship with his Slytherin first years,” explained Ginny.

“Do you mind if they come in? They don’t have to stay for long,” Harry assured them. The Weasleys said it was fine, and a few minutes later, ten Slytherins ran into the room. Augustina Delva ran up to him and hugged him tightly. “Oh, Professor, we were so worried...” As soon as she let go, the other girls all took their turn, and he returned their hugs gratefully.

George couldn’t help saying, “Funny, I don’t seem to remember student-teacher relations being quite so good when we were here.”

Harry chuckled. “We have an unusually good group of first years,” he said.

“No, he’s an unusually good teacher,” Helen contradicted him. “And he drove off Voldemort. How many teachers can say that?”

The Weasleys reacted with surprise; they were barely used to saying the name themselves, never mind hearing an eleven-year-old say it so unselfconsciously.

“Thank you, Helen,” Harry said. “That’s nice of you.”

“Well, it’s true!” said another girl indignantly. There were many sounds of agreement. The Weasleys smiled.

Harry said, “You guys, I want you to meet some friends of mine... well, they’re more like family, really. The Weasleys, Ron and Ginny’s family. Arthur, Molly, Bill, Fred, and George.”

David Septus gaped. “You’re Fred and George?” he asked excitedly.

“The fireworks, and the swamp?” chimed in Augustina.

“You two are famous!” enthused Hedrick. “We heard all about what you did last year, it was so brilliant...”

Mrs. Weasley looked unhappy as Fred and George grinned broadly. “Well, no doubt the tales are exaggerated...” Fred said with obvious false modesty.

“But it is nice to know that we have left a legacy,” added George.

“Pansy,” Harry said, “I just showed the Weasleys what happened in Hogsmeade, in the Pensieve. I can show you and the first years, if you’d like.” Harry had to explain to them how the Pensieve worked. The first years were very excited to be able to see Harry’s memories of what had happened. They gathered around the Pensieve, all twelve of them barely fitting, and put their fingers in. They emerged a few minutes later, all except Harry with very impressed looks.

“Wow...” said Helen. “I mean, hearing about it is one thing, but seeing it is different. I remember,” she continued, now speaking more to the Weasley parents, “in the first week, I asked Ron how he could do stuff that was so dangerous, and he said the thing was not to think about it. He had to think about this, but he did it anyway. That was really brave, what he did, what they did. But you didn’t want them to do it, did you,” she asked Harry. “At the end, I could tell. You were scared for them.”

Harry nodded. “No, I didn’t want them to. They could have died. They still might.”

“But we would have done it,” protested Hedrick. “We would have wanted to, anyway. If we were brave enough.” Others voiced agreement.

“I know you would,” said Harry, wanting to honor their desire to help rather than chastise them. “But you have to understand... my parents died saving me. A very close friend died in June, helping to keep me safe. It makes me feel like I don’t want more people dying for me, enough already have. It’s hard when people you care about risk themselves for you.”

Arthur Weasley stepped forward and looked at Harry seriously. “I can imagine what you must feel, Harry. But you inspire this kind of loyalty. I can see it’s

a burden as well as a gift. But you're important, and you're going to have to get used to the fact that people want to do this for you. You don't honor them by disapproving of what they do."

Harry looked a bit ashamed. "I see what you mean, Mr. Weasley. I'll try."

"Harry... please call me Arthur." Harry raised his eyebrows a little, and nodded.

The Slytherin first years lingered for another fifteen minutes, talking to various Weasleys, and Pansy talked to Fred and George for a while, then Bill. Finally, Pansy decided that the first years had stayed long enough, and suggested they go. They left, followed by Pansy.

Molly watched them go, a smile on her face. "I've never seen students like that before," she said, impressed. "They really love you, Harry."

"I love them, too," he said earnestly. "They're really great."

"I knew you'd be a successful teacher," she said. "But even I didn't imagine this would happen, that you would be thought of this way. I'm sure that no Hogwarts teacher has ever been this... beloved, even Professor Dumbledore."

Bill agreed. "They couldn't wait to tell me about how much they loved your class. They wish they could have it every day. It's nice for them that they have a teacher they feel that way about. Bet you don't have absenteeism problems."

Harry admitted that some rather ill students had tried to attend his class anyway. The Weasleys were impressed, but not surprised. "I sure hope your example doesn't spread, Harry," said Fred. "We'd never sell another Snackbox again."

"Thank goodness for Binns, Trelawney, and Snape," agreed George.

"Speaking of which," Harry pointed out, "Binns'll never notice, but Snape and anyone else who's on the ball is starting to recognize the Snackbox symptoms. You're going to have to come up with new ones, even Professor Dumbledore mentioned that."

"Yes, he told us, too," said George. "We're working on it right now, in fact."

“Our newest idea is a Diarrhea Dumpling,” said Fred, smiling. The Weasleys and Harry laughed, except for Molly, who made a face. “That’s disgusting,” she said, as the others laughed more.

The Weasleys stayed for another half hour. They would have liked to stay longer, but they knew it could be a while before Ron woke, and as a practical matter they couldn’t stay indefinitely. Before she left, Molly visited every bed, kissing the forehead of each person, and lastly, Harry’s. The Weasleys filed out, except Ginny, who stayed behind with Harry. They sat down together on Harry’s bed.

“I see you’re doing better today,” she said.

“You and Pansy really helped,” he said. “You kept me from wallowing in my own misery any more than I had to. And I really would have wallowed, I know it.”

“That’s what friends are for, Harry. Now you should probably get some food, you must be starved. I know you haven’t left here yet.”

Harry had to admit he was hungry. He asked her to come with him, but she wasn’t willing to leave the infirmary, on the chance that someone else might awaken. “There should be someone here all the time,” Ginny said. “Probably Madam Pomfrey will be back later today, and be able to look after them. But you should go, get some food, talk to a few people. They’ll be stopping you in the halls anyway.”

“What about classes?” Harry asked. It hadn’t occurred to him that he had already missed three days’ worth of classes.

“Oh, you didn’t know? On Sunday evening, Professor Dumbledore announced that because of what happened, there would be no classes this week. There’s going to be an extra week at the end of the year to compensate. It’s not as though people would be able to concentrate very well on their schoolwork.”

Harry could see the point of that. He left the infirmary and headed to the kitchens, where he was greeted enthusiastically by the house-elves, not only Dobby. He ate his food in the nearly empty Great Hall, then headed back to Gryffindor Tower, where he was mobbed when he climbed in the portrait hole. He patiently

spent a half hour answering people's questions and talking about what happened, and expressed his condolences to the third years, who had lost a friend.

He showered, changed, and got a few things from his dormitory before heading back to the infirmary. Ginny was still there, along with a group of Hufflepuffs visiting Justin. Harry greeted them and talked to them for a while, expressing his gratitude for what Justin had done. "In some ways, he reminds me a lot of Cedric," Harry told them. "This was the kind of thing Cedric would have done, I'm sure of it." They thanked Harry, knowing what a compliment it was.

After they left, Ginny sat in a chair between Ron and Neville's beds, and Harry pulled up a chair next to her. She took his hand, and they sat in silence, waiting.

Madam Pomfrey returned on Thursday afternoon and greeted Harry warmly, but told him his presence was no longer required. He informed her that he would stay until all of his friends had awakened; his tone suggested that his removal would only be achieved by force. She gave him a look, but understood why he was being that way, and muttered something about him having special dispensation due to the fact that he was a teacher.

Sitting next to Ginny, Harry realized that Ernie had not been in since he had awoken. He pulled out his new Hogwarts map, and got a speeded-up display of Ernie's whereabouts. He had spent a lot of time in his dormitory, but almost none in the Hufflepuff common room. Most time not spent in his dormitory, Harry saw, had been spent under a tree, the same one Harry had sat under as he grieved for Sirius in June. He wondered if that tree was somehow a magnet for the grief-stricken.

"You should go talk to him," said Ginny, seeing what Harry was doing. "It may be that only you can forgive him, or help him to forgive himself."

“I was going to go do that,” Harry confirmed. “He obviously doesn’t want to come here because he’ll have to face me.” He folded up the map and headed out of the infirmary, and out of the castle.

It was a cold, dry, and cloudy day, not the ideal day for sitting around outside. Ernie was one of the very few outside the castle. Harry headed over to the tree; Ernie didn’t see Harry until Harry sat down next to him.

“Hi, Ernie,” Harry said. Ernie nodded but didn’t say anything; Harry could tell he was embarrassed and didn’t know what to say.

“I see you’ve become rather attached to this tree,” Harry tried again.

Ernie looked surprised. “How did you—oh, the map. You’re supposed to be looking for Slytherins with that, not me,” he said, annoyed.

Harry decided the direct approach was better; Ernie didn’t seem to be in a mood to take hints. “I think it’s also reasonable to use it to check up on people we’re concerned about.”

Ernie looked at him as if trying to figure out what Harry was thinking. Finally he said, “Don’t see why you should be. I wasn’t all that concerned about what happened to you.”

“Just because you didn’t decide, on less than a second’s notice, that you were willing to die for me?” Harry asked, trying to keep the incredulity out of his voice. “You’re holding yourself up to an impossibly high standard, Ernie.”

“It wasn’t impossible for them,” Ernie replied. Harry realized that Ernie wasn’t about to let himself off the hook so easily.

“Yes, but Ron, Neville, and Hermione are my closest friends. I’m friendly with you and Justin, and I’ve always appreciated your support, but this is something I couldn’t possibly have expected of you. You shouldn’t expect it of yourself.”

“Justin did it.”

“That doesn’t mean anything about you, though,” Harry said. “It’s a huge decision to make, it’s not easy. Maybe on a different day you’d have made a different decision, or Justin would’ve. You can’t possibly say. What we choose to do in any

instant doesn't define who we are. Besides, I'm pretty sure Justin decided in advance to do it; I think he figured out from what Hermione said what they were going to do, and you didn't. That's not something you can blame yourself for. Maybe he wouldn't have done it with only a second's notice, or maybe you would've if you'd realized what was going on. You can't know."

Ernie turned to face him, in anguish. "I know enough. I know even thinking back on it, wishing I'd done it differently... if I had it to do over, I might still do the same thing. I don't think you can understand this, Harry. You're brave, everyone knows it. You'd have done it for me, I know. Who I was on Sunday is not who I want to be, but I'm afraid it's who I am."

"You can still be that, Ernie, though I'm not convinced you're not already. Again, we're talking about a split-second decision. You just can't beat yourself up over that. And it's a huge thing. It's like deciding you'll never be a good athlete because you didn't high-jump seven feet on your first try. Hermione, Ron, and Neville had all been in life-threatening situations before, had all done things they knew might mean their death. They knew what it was about. As for Justin, maybe he's just exceptional, I don't know. But it just isn't a fair standard to hold yourself to. I should know, I've held myself to a lot of unfair standards lately."

"What do you mean?" asked Ernie.

"I blamed myself for the four deaths," Harry said. "If I hadn't started the crusade, those people would be alive right now."

"Yes, but you were doing the right thing, and you know it," Ernie said. "There's nothing else to do but fight him. You said it, and you were right."

Harry nodded. "I know. But it seems different when there are consequences like this. Sometimes we can't help but feel things that we kind of know aren't right, like you are right now. Ernie, when I woke up and found out about the four who died... I was absolutely convinced it was all my fault. I wished I were dead instead of them. I cried for a long time. I think part of me knew that I shouldn't feel that way, and a part of you knows you shouldn't be as hard on yourself as you're being."

“But you did the right thing, Harry—“

“I put people’s lives at risk!” Harry said, almost angrily. “People who didn’t choose to be at risk. I did that. I’m not saying it’s wrong. I’m saying it’s understandable that I would react like I did, but I also had to wake up and realize that that’s just part of life, especially in a situation like this, where Voldemort could kill anyone at any time. And you have to realize that an action taken in one split second doesn’t say everything there is to say about you. It’s just too much, Ernie. I can’t walk around blaming myself for their deaths. You can’t walk around blaming yourself for this. It’s not fair to yourself, and it’s not fair to those around you.”

“Nobody’s been talking to me much lately,” Ernie said.

Harry took out the map and waved it a bit. “You’ve been mainly here and in the dormitory, Ernie. You haven’t given people much chance to talk to you, and your attitude doesn’t welcome it, either. You’ve got to give people a chance. I think they’ll react differently than you expect. One thing I know for sure, the four people in the infirmary won’t blame you. And I don’t, either.” Harry fixed his gaze on Ernie, silently pleading for him to give himself a break.

Ernie stared back for a moment. Finally he asked, “Why do you care, Harry? I chickened out when I could have helped save your life. You could be up there basking in the adulation of the school. Why come out here?”

Harry couldn’t help but let out a dry chuckle. “The last thing I feel like doing right now, Ernie, is basking in anyone’s adulation. It’s hard enough not to wallow in my own misery. But to answer your question, two reasons. One, I know what it feels like to blame yourself for something you shouldn’t; I’ve done it a lot lately. And two, you made an effort to be supportive of me when I really needed it.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes; Harry could tell Ernie was trying to accept what he was saying, but having a hard time. Harry realized he had probably convinced Ernie, and it would just take time for it to sink in. Harry stood up. “C’mon, Ernie. Let’s go to the infirmary, wait on the others some more.” He held out his hand to help Ernie up. Ernie just stared for a moment; Harry stared back

and kept his hand out. Finally Ernie took it, and Harry helped him up. They walked back to the castle together.

Ernie stayed with Harry and Ginny for a few hours before heading back to the Hufflepuff common room, where, Harry noted with satisfaction while looking at his Hogwarts map, he stayed for another two hours, near a number of other people.

Pansy joined them at 10:00, and the three sat together and talked for over an hour. Eventually, Harry said, “Pansy, what do the Slytherins think you’re doing when you’re out of your dormitory so much? Your dormitory-mates must be noticing something.”

“I assume they think it’s something to do with the unusual situation we have here,” Pansy said. “They don’t ask.” After a short silence, she continued, “I don’t have much of a relationship with them, anyway, so they’re not going to ask many questions. I mean, we’re polite to each other, but they sort of have their own group, which I’m outside of. I think it’s because at some point I started spending a lot of time with Malfoy, and my being one of his toadies probably disgusted them. It disgusts me, too, now, of course. It’s probably too late to build any real relationship with them now, which is sad.”

“I don’t think it’s too late,” Harry said. “Look at the relationship you’ve built with me, and it hasn’t been that long.”

“Yeah,” agreed Ginny. “I’m comfortable with you, and that’s only from spending parts of four days together. Once they find out you’ve been working against Malfoy, they’ll probably be open to the idea of being more friendly with you.”

Appreciatively, Pansy said, “That’s nice of you, both of you. Maybe you’re right. We’ll see.”

“How do your dormitory-mates regard Malfoy?” Ginny wondered.

“We haven’t talked about it that much, since they think I’m practically his girlfriend,” Pansy said, her face expressing her disgust at the notion. I think that they see him pretty much for what he is, which is why they don’t think much of me. They mostly try to avoid dealing with him. Wish I could do that. “

Harry interjected, ”You could–“

”Don’t you start with that,” Pansy warned him, with a finger pointed at him for emphasis.

Harry blinked. “You don’t even know what I was going to say!”

“You were going to say that I could come out in the open, and I wouldn’t have to deal with Malfoy anymore, I’d be safe, and I could have a relationship with whoever I wanted.”

Harry’s eyebrows went up a little. “Well, okay, then you did know what I was going to say,” he conceded. Ginny giggled.

“As if he hasn’t told me that a half dozen times,” Pansy said to Ginny. “He’ll make a good father someday, always worrying.”

“I thought mothers were supposed to be the ones that worried,” Harry said.

“Well, it didn’t seem right to suggest that you’d make a good mother someday,” Pansy said reasonably. Ginny giggled again.

“Guess not,” Harry agreed. “By the way, you should really try to get out quick if it looks like Neville or Justin is waking up, since they don’t know about you.”

“Or, we could decide that if Neville and Justin are willing to risk their lives for you, then they can be trusted to keep their mouths shut,” said Pansy. “You trust them, don’t you?”

“Of course I trust them,” said Harry, annoyed. “You know what I’m talking about, and this isn’t just me worrying stupidly. The more people know, the more risk there is. They don’t need to know.”

“It’s so nice that you two are at the stage of your relationship where you bicker so much,” Ginny said. Harry and Pansy both laughed.

“Ron and Hermione have been at that stage for several years now,” Harry muttered.

“They bicker a lot?” Pansy asked. Harry and Ginny chuckled.

“All the time, it seems like,” Harry said. “It’s not so bad this year, but usually, yes. It’s almost amazing that they’re friends, they have such different personalities.”

“Anyway,” said Pansy, “I’m sorry, Harry, but I’m not going to go tearing out of the room just because the wrong person wakes up. If I’m here when it happens, then that’s the way it is. I mean, suppose it’s Neville, who’s he going to tell?”

“He wouldn’t tell anybody,” Harry said. “It’s just the principle.”

“I have to say, I was really impressed with what he did in Hogsmeade, since I got to see it for myself,” said Pansy. “He used to be so shy, it’s amazing how he’s changed. Do you know what caused it?”

“His grandmother thinks that being in the D.A. had a lot to do with it,” Harry said.

The voice was so weak, Harry could barely hear it. “She’s right,” Neville said.

Harry, Ginny, and Pansy looked at each other for a second, then stood up and ran to Neville’s bedside. “Neville?” asked Harry. Neville looked up him and nodded. Harry made a triumphant fist and exulted, “Yes!” Ginny leaned over and kissed Neville on the cheek.

“Neville, we’ve been really worried about you, about all of you,” said Harry. “You’re the first to wake up.”

“So, I guess it worked, then?” Neville asked.

Harry nodded, and had to remember not to chastise Neville or the rest for what they’d done. “Thank you, Neville. I’m alive because of you.”

Neville smiled. “I’m glad.” He paused, looking around. “What’s she doing here?” he asked, referring to Pansy, who just smiled.

“She’s been helping me since early September. She’s been spying on Malfoy for me, and she saved me from long exposure to Malfoy’s Confundus Beam during the Slytherin match. Dumbledore put up the magic-detection field because of her warning. And she’s become a good friend of mine. Sorry I didn’t tell you, but—“

”I didn’t need to know,” Neville finished. “I heard that part. Of course I won’t tell anybody.”

“I know. Anyway, she’s here to be nice, to help keep me company. She and Ginny are about the only friends I have now who haven’t been unconscious for four days.”

“Four days?” asked Neville in amazement. “Wow, I had no idea. How are the other two doing? You said I was the first one awake?”

“Other three, Neville, and yes. Justin joined the Diffusion.”

“Justin? Wow, I wouldn’t have expected that,” said Neville.

“I don’t think any of us did, Neville. Just one of life’s little surprises. By the way, I notice that you didn’t mention to me what you were going to do.”

Neville nodded. “There was no time to argue, so I thought it was better to skip that part.”

“I’ll have to remember that,” said Pansy wryly. “Sounds like a good timesaver.”

Neville slowly sat up, Ginny and Harry helping him. He stared at Pansy for a few seconds, then caught himself. “Sorry,” he said to her. “I’m just not used to seeing you, in this kind of situation. I keep thinking you’re going to make fun of us or something.”

Her expression changed from happy to ashamed in a flash. “I understand,” she said. “I have a lot to make up for.”

Neville’s face fell as he saw her reaction. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I don’t know what’s been going on... I’m sorry.”

“No, you have every right to say that,” she assured him. “This is all very new to you. That’s been your only experience with me.”

“Well,” Neville said, “If Harry says you’re his good friend, then that’s good enough for me. So, what’s happened since I’ve been out? Oh, right, Hogsmeade. What ended up happening in the attack?”

Harry grew somber. “Four dead,” he said. He gave the names.

Neville shook his head sadly. “I’m sorry, Harry. I know you must feel responsible, but you really aren’t.”

Harry nodded. “So everyone’s been telling me. But thank you anyway. Not much else going on besides that. The week’s classes were canceled.”

As Harry was speaking, he thought he saw the smallest movement from Hermione. He rushed over to her bed and took her hand. “Hermione? Are you awake?” he asked. She blinked twice and looked up at him. He smiled in delight, causing her to smile back. “It worked,” she said. He nodded. Pansy and Ginny walked over, smiling.

She looked at him happily. “I suppose you’re going to be mad at us,” she said.

He shook his head. “I’m trying to deal with it. You guys saved my life, and I’m extremely grateful.” He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

She blushed a little. “I bet Neville didn’t get one of those.”

Harry smiled. “No, but I’m saving one for Ron when he wakes up.” They all laughed, including Neville. “I’d pay to see that,” Hermione said.

Ginny and Pansy both touched Hermione’s arm. “We’re so glad you’re back,” said Ginny. Pansy just smiled. The room soon became somber again after Hermione asked about the toll from Hogsmeade, and Ginny told her. She looked at Harry with great pity, knowing what he must have gone through.

“It’s really horrible, Harry, but honestly... we must have taken down ten or fifteen of those people, and there had to be more. I expected the number to be higher than four, much higher.”

“That’s what Dumbledore said, too,” said Harry. “It’s not much consolation, but it’s a little.”

They all talked for another hour, and finally they went to sleep, Ginny back to Gryffindor Tower. Pansy wanted to stay in case anyone else woke up, but was evicted by Madam Pomfrey, who assured her that she would watch during the night.

Harry awoke in his infirmary bed to see Ron and Justin standing next to their beds, talking. He leaped out of bed, grinning, ran to Ron, and hugged him before Ron could react. To Harry's surprise, Ron exhibited no discomfort, and returned the hug. To Harry's reaction, Ron said, "Well, we did save your life, so it doesn't seem like a hug is too far out of line."

"Hermione would be proud, Ron," Harry said. He looked around to see where she was, and found her next to Neville's bed, talking to him. She glanced at Harry and smiled.

Harry walked over to Justin, who now knew what to expect. Justin smiled as Harry hugged him. "Thank you, Justin," Harry said. "That was a lot you did. I appreciate it, more than I can say."

Justin nodded. "Just seemed like the thing to do. They were obviously out to get you, and that was all we could do. Hermione, when you told us about Fawkes, I assume you were referring to what eventually happened?"

She walked over and nodded. "I couldn't say anything directly, because Harry would've had a fit, and we didn't have time for that. Also, it's not the kind of thing you want to ask directly, because it's really a lot. I just wanted to give you the chance in case you wanted to do it, but not make you feel like you should."

"I think you got it just about right. I got the impression from Ernie's face that he didn't get what you were talking about, which was fine. I figured we'd need one guy to take down the attacker, and that could be him." Justin saw the expression on Harry's face, and took a guess. "Don't tell me, he's been down on himself about it."

"Yes, he has," Harry confirmed. "I've talked to him about it, Dumbledore has, Ginny has... I think he's just starting to get through it. One more dose of 'don't worry about it' from you should finish it off, I hope."

Dismayed, Justin said, “Damn him... he would be like this, he always has these impossible expectations of himself. You should have heard him moan about missing an Outstanding O.W.L. in Astronomy. You’d have thought the world was ending.”

Harry looked at Hermione, failing to keep a grin off his face. She gave him an annoyed look and said, “All right, go ahead...”

With as straight a face as he could manage, Harry said, “Justin, I can’t imagine what that must have been like.”

Justin chuckled. “Oh, yeah, I forgot... sorry, Hermione. You two’ll be a great Head Boy and Girl next year. Anyway—“

Ron laughed out loud. “Does everyone think that?” Hermione asked.

“I think so,” answered Justin. “Ernie says he thinks Harry’ll get it. After this year, I’d say he was right, except Harry’ll still be a teacher. I don’t think they’d give it to you, Harry, not that you care. I think Ernie’s just trying not to get his hopes up. Anyway, yeah, thanks for the warning, Harry. I’ll harp on him about it, and he’ll get over it.”

Harry walked over to Neville and hugged him, saying, “Anyone who stays with me for five nights and loses sleep while I deal with Voldemort, or saves my life, gets a hug. So that’s two for you this year, Neville.”

Neville grinned and patted Harry on the shoulder. “Let’s hope it stays at two for the year. You’ve had enough excitement.”

“You should know by now, Neville. I’m Harry Potter. Excitement follows me around, and leaps out at me when I least expect it.” Harry approached Hermione. “And you,” he said, looking into her eyes, “you who so brazenly defy my wishes by saving my life while putting yours at risk...” She melted and hugged him. “I couldn’t want a better friend,” he whispered in her ear. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re very welcome. I’m just glad you’re not mad,” she teased him.

“Well, I don’t know about the rest of you, but I feel like I haven’t eaten for a few days, so what do you say we all go down for breakfast,” suggested Ron. They did, leaving the infirmary empty for the first time in days.

It was Sunday afternoon, and the Gryffindor Quidditch team was walking off the pitch after an impromptu practice; there had been little to do all week, and Ron had now sufficiently recovered to practice. It had gone well, though Harry had found himself, while searching for the Snitch, reflecting on what Hermione had said about the Snitch being far too important a part of the game, and it made sense to him. He decided not to bring it up with Ron, though. He didn’t know if Ron’s attitude towards Hermione about the topic last week had been genuine or for the sake of being contrary, but he didn’t feel like finding out.

“Well, that was a pretty good practice,” Ron said. “Of course, it was a pretty good match we had last week. Ginny, Katie, I assume that next time you’re going to score some goals yourselves?”

“I don’t know, it worked pretty well last time,” said Katie facetiously. “Besides, he’s the new guy, why not make him do all the work?”

“Yeah, if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it,” agreed Ginny. Dennis chuckled.

“Well, I’m glad that’s taken care of,” said Ron sarcastically. “At least next time we play Hufflepuff, and if you can count on them for one thing, it’s that they’ll play fair. That’ll be especially welcome.” Several teammates grunted their agreement.

“That’s for sure,” agreed Harry. “If I had to play Malfoy again, I’d probably fly around encased in my new spell’s shield.”

“Good idea, Harry,” said Ginny. “Of course, then, considering what the shield’s made of, you’d start being called the Seeker of Love.” The rest of the team laughed at the play on words, even Harry.

“Just so long as I’m not known as the Seeker of Girlfriends,” Harry joked, to more laughter, as Harry noticed a lone figure approaching them.

“Ah, I see my legacy still haunts you, Harry,” smiled Hugo Brantell, offering his hand, which Harry shook. “If I hadn’t asked you that question...”

“You’d have deprived my friends and well-wishers of hours of fun at my expense, so you must be very proud. How are you doing?”

“Good, Harry, good. Better than you, though that’s not too difficult these days. I was wondering if I could get that interview anytime soon.” He looked at Ron. “You, too, Ron. I want all five of you, if it’s all right.”

Ron appeared to consider it. “I don’t know, Hugo, I get enough publicity as it is. Why don’t you talk to just Harry instead?” The team laughed as Harry whacked Ron lightly on the arm.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Hugo said. “Is right now okay? I’ve already gathered the others, they’re at the castle entrance. We can do it in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.” Harry and Ron agreed, so they walked with Hugo up to the entrance, where they met Neville, Hermione, and Justin, and headed to the classroom.

They sat down in a circle of student desks. Hugo said, “First of all, I should tell you that Professor Dumbledore has shown me Harry’s memory of the events of last Sunday, so I don’t need to ask any particular questions about that. Now, can everyone tell me what they were doing throughout the day? I may or may not use it, but it could be interesting background.” It didn’t take long to tell him; as the four Gryffindors had spent the day together, there were only two accounts.

“Harry, why were you going to buy butterbeer for the first and second years?”

Harry had almost forgotten that he’d planned to do that; he recalled that it was in the memory that Hugo had seen. He explained that those students couldn’t go to Hogsmeade. “Now, it’s hard to say if or when I’ll be able to do that,” Harry finished.

“Yes, I can see that,” agreed Hugo. “Neville, after the first attack on Harry, you brought up the idea of using the Diffusion Shield to Ron and Hermione. What made you think of it?”

Neville looked nervous; this was his first time being interviewed as one of the people featured in an article. “I’m not sure... I was just thinking about what, if anything, could be done to protect Harry if it happened again. It especially had to be something that didn’t require his cooperation. For example, I thought of having us move as a group with Harry at the center so he’d always be shielded by one of us. But somehow I didn’t think he’d agree with the idea.”

“Why would you think that, Neville?” asked Ron, deadpan.

“Just a feeling, Ron. Anyway, the Diffusion Shield just came into my head, and it was as good as it was going to get, the obvious choice. It had a chance of working, and Harry didn’t have to know we were going to do it, or cooperate in any way.”

“But it had the drawback of possibly killing you all if it didn’t work,” Hugo pointed out.

“Well, I didn’t say it was perfect,” Neville said, as the others chuckled. “I knew that could happen. But there was nothing else to do. We couldn’t just stand by and watch it happen.”

Hugo looked at Harry. “From what I saw in the Pensieve, Harry, it seemed as though you would just as soon they hadn’t done it.”

Harry sighed. “I’m extremely grateful for what they did, but yes, if I could have stopped them from doing it, I would have. They all could have been killed. You know already that I have no problem accepting risk, but great problems delegating it to others, especially on my behalf. My friends, knowing this about me, naturally went behind my back.”

“It was the only thing to do, really,” said Ron.

“There was no time for an argument,” said Hermione.

“Ron, Hermione, you didn’t hesitate at all when Neville suggested the idea? I mean, you knew the risks were substantial, it couldn’t have been a trivial decision,” pointed out Hugo.

“Of course it wasn’t trivial, but at the same time, it was just obvious that it had to be done,” said Ron. “Kind of like Harry with Voldemort in September, he just felt he had no choice. This was like that. Like Neville said, we couldn’t just let him be killed. I didn’t hesitate, and I know Hermione didn’t, either.”

“It’s almost like faith,” added Hermione. “You just know it, you don’t question it. But it wouldn’t have only been that way for Harry; we would have done it no matter which of us was the target. Maybe one day we’ll get killed doing it, I don’t know. But Harry’s in this thing deep, and we’re in it with him. So, no, there was no hesitation. You just know what you have to do, and you do it. You worry about the rest later.”

“I’ve talked to some people,” said Hugo, “and nobody is that surprised that you, Ron, and Neville did this for Harry. Well, they’re kind of surprised at Neville. I keep hearing the phrase ‘he used to be so shy.’ But people are very surprised that Justin did it too.”

“So was I,” Ron said. Neville nodded in agreement.

“So, Justin, I see by your expression that you’ve already been asked this more than a dozen times in the past few days. So you must have a good answer by now.”

“Well, I have the same answer, anyway, which is, ‘it seemed like the thing to do,’ which most people seem to accept,” Justin said. “Obviously it wasn’t a no-brainer for me like it was for the others. They’ve put their lives at risk for Harry before, it’s a decision they’d already made. I hadn’t, so I had to decide, and I didn’t have that much time to do it. I didn’t feel pressured, though. I knew nobody would think any less of me if I didn’t.

“As everyone has pointed out, I’m not that close with Harry. We like each other, we’re friendly, I support him, and I root for him in Quidditch when he’s not

playing Hufflepuff.” The others chuckled. “So it’s not like the others, who feel a strong personal closeness to Harry. In my case it’s...” He stopped to think for a minute.

“I think it’s two things. One thing is that he’s taken on such a prominent role in the fight against Voldemort; by helping him, you’re helping fight Voldemort, and that’s what we all should be doing. But the main thing is what he did against Voldemort in September. Not the new spell exactly, but the awesome bravery he showed in being willing to face Voldemort and the Curse night after night. You can’t not be inspired by that. You see that, and you think, ‘Here’s someone who I could risk my life for and know that it would be worth it.’ I didn’t think all this consciously, in the situation, but I think it all factored in. The short version is still right: It seemed like the right thing to do.”

“Thank you, Justin, that’s a pretty good answer,” said Hugo. “I would ask Harry his reaction, but I know there’s not much he could say. So, Hermione, I’ll ask you instead. What’s your reaction to what Justin said?”

“I’m not surprised, Hugo,” she said. “I can easily see where Harry would inspire that sort of feeling even in people who don’t know him that well. I’ve heard that quite a few people around the school have said they would have joined, or that they would have if they knew how to do the spell. So, I think there are a number of people who would have felt as Justin did. Which is not to take away from what Justin did, which was terrific. He could have saved all our lives, for all we know. Maybe three wouldn’t have been enough.” Ron and Neville nodded, indicating they’d considered that as well.

“I actually did think of that, too,” added Justin. “I couldn’t back out of helping, thinking, ‘they’ve got it in hand,’ because I knew they were in big danger too. It was easier to do it, knowing that they would as well. And you have to be inspired by what they were going to do, too. They set an example that you feel like you want to follow.” Harry smiled as the others now were embarrassed.

“Hermione, and I want to ask Justin the same thing in a minute, you’re Muggle-born, and your parents have no connection to the wizarding world. How do they feel about you taking this kind of risk?”

“I don’t know, Hugo, because I try not to tell them about stuff like this,” she said, grinning sheepishly. “They would just worry. Also, they don’t know what’s at stake, and it would be hard to explain it to them.”

“As for me,” said Justin, “I haven’t had to make that decision yet; fortunately, my brother hasn’t said anything to our parents. I may do what Hermione did, for the same reasons. There’s no great reason to tell them, and they would worry, might even want to yank us away from here.”

“Ron?”

“Well, of course my parents know extremely well what’s at stake, and they approve of what I do; I know they’re proud. They worry, of course, especially my mum, like I imagine all mothers do. But also, Harry’s a part of our family now, so she worries about him as much as she does me.” He chuckled. “Worrying about Harry, now that could be a full-time job.”

“Neville?”

“I haven’t talked to my grandmother since before Hogsmeade, so I’m not sure, but I’m pretty sure she’ll be proud, and won’t criticize what I did. My parents…” Neville paused, making a decision. “My parents were Aurors, and as some people know, were involved in fighting Voldemort the last time around. When I was a baby, they were captured by Death Eaters and tortured with the Cruciatus Curse until they lost their minds, so my gran’s raised me. She and I are both proud of what they did, what they fought for. She’s already lost a lot to Voldemort, and she knows he has to be fought. She knows there are risks, and that they’re worth taking.”

Harry saw that, like him, Ron and Hermione were looking at Neville with respect and admiration, knowing what a difficult topic that had been for him.

Hermione, sitting next to Neville, gave his arm a squeeze. He nodded at her in gratitude.

“Harry?”

“If you’re referring to my aunt and uncle, they don’t take any interest in wizarding affairs; they would just as soon not know about it.” He ended his answer without any further elaboration, confident that Hugo would know why what was unspoken was unspoken.

“Harry, I’m sorry, but I have to ask you a couple of hard questions here,” Hugo said. “First of all, do you think there’s any connection between what happened in Hogsmeade and your campaign to say Voldemort’s name?”

“Yes, I’d be surprised if that wasn’t the case,” said Harry. “The fact that it happened while students were in the village, the fact that I was specifically targeted, seem to make it pretty clear.”

“So, then, it seems clear that the four who died would still be alive had you never started your efforts to say Voldemort’s name. It’s obvious that this has occurred to you. How have the deaths affected you personally? Do you feel any responsibility, any blame, attaches to you?”

Harry had known he would be asked this question, and had thought about his answer. “To the first question... I was very personally affected by their deaths. I had taught them all, and liked them all. I cried for them, as I’m sure that many at Hogwarts did. We’ll miss them. As to the second question... I think everyone knows where the blame and responsibility for this lie, and that’s with Voldemort, who ordered it. You’re right when you say this wouldn’t have happened except for my campaign, and that this had obviously occurred to me. You even mentioned the possibility when you interviewed me in September. But innocents are always going to die when Voldemort is around, as we know from last time. Cedric Diggory was killed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and maybe this is a bit similar. What it does is bring home more strongly the point that Voldemort has to be stopped, or this sort of thing will keep happening. And anybody who thinks that we

shouldn't fight him because of things like this, well, that's exactly what he wants, that's why he does this. You couldn't reward him any better for killing people than to say, all right, we won't fight you anymore. The more people die, the harder our resolve has to be. There's nothing else for it."

There was silence for a short time. Then Hugo said, "Okay, Harry, everyone, I guess that's all I need. But one other thing... you four, I very much admire what you did. I'm not sure I could do it, at least not right now. Who knows, maybe I could if I was around Harry long enough. But the wizarding world owes you quite a debt. Thanks for talking to me, and thanks for saving him."

They acknowledged his compliment, thanked him, and got up. "Harry, could you stay behind for a moment?" Harry nodded. The others left, but Justin hung back. "Harry, there was something I wanted to mention to you... we're not still on the record, are we?" he asked Hugo, who shook his head.

"Harry, I thought you should know... on Thursday night, it must have been, there was a time when I was sort of awake, but not very... I couldn't move, wasn't awake enough to move, but I could hear things. I think this was around the time Neville woke up, and I heard a person who I didn't expect to hear, who you were obviously friendly with."

Harry understood that Justin was being cautious because he didn't know what Hugo knew. "If you mean who I think you mean, Hugo already knows. Do you mean Pansy?"

Justin nodded. "I wondered if I was dreaming, or hearing things wrong. It's almost like you were suddenly buddies with Malfoy. What in the world happened?"

Harry took a few minutes to explain it. Justin shook his head in amazement. "It's going to be tough to get used to," he said. "If Malfoy finds out, she'll really be in trouble, he'll be furious." Harry agreed, and gave Justin the now-standard security lecture: Tell no one, even people you trust. Justin said he understood, then left.

Hugo looked uncomfortable. "Harry, I'm sorry I had to ask that last question. I just didn't see how I could avoid it, some people would make that

connection. I could tell that your answer was honest, but that what you said is almost what you know is true and want to believe, rather than what you believe now. I could tell that you're finding it very hard to detach yourself from the deaths, and I felt bad for asking, because it just reminds you of that. It really is not your fault."

Harry thanked him, then said, "Everyone's been telling me that, and it's true on a certain level, I know. On a big scale, we probably did better with me doing the campaign than without. But I wouldn't want to look into the eyes of those kids' parents and tell them that. That's where I have a problem."

"I understand. I can tell how hard it was for you."

"Thanks, Hugo. I guess you're coming to the Halloween feast tonight?"

Hugo nodded. "I think it was a good idea to have it anyway, even though Halloween was last week. I think I'll spend some time at the Slytherin table, see how people are responding to Malfoy's absence."

"I'd be very interested in what you find out," said Harry, with a small grin.

"I think I can fit you in for a quick word before I leave," agreed Hugo.

The Halloween decorations were up, the ghosts were present, and there was as much festive cheer in the Great Hall as the circumstances permitted. At Dumbledore's request, Harry sat at the teachers' table at the beginning of the feast. He assured Harry that he could join his friends later.

Harry was sitting between Flitwick and McGonagall. He absently wondered whether whoever arranged the seating went out of their way to make sure he was never seated next to Snape. He didn't want to think about having to make small talk with Snape, and wondered how the other teachers did it. Even when not antagonistic, Snape did not engage in idle conversation.

Flitwick did, though, and Harry enjoyed talking to him. He had been telling Harry stories, from the sound of them told many times before. Harry found Flitwick to be good at telling stories, and they were very interesting, mostly ones

based in interesting things students had done in his class. He was halfway through one when Dumbledore asked for everyone's attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Halloween feast. Before we tuck into our food, though, I would like to make a few comments and a few presentations.

"Directing your attention to the head of the Gryffindor table, we have a few guests today, including most of the Weasley family: Arthur, Molly, Bill, Fred, and George." Recognition of the last two names brought decent applause, to which the twins ostentatiously turned and waved, to the embarrassment of their mother.

"The last two were well known around the school for their practical jokes, and in recognition of this, I have played a small one on them. They were asked here tonight to witness members of their family being given Special Awards for Services to the School. That was true, strictly speaking, but misleading. For their services to the school near the end of last year in supporting and raising the morale of the staff and their fellow students, we give Special Awards for Services to the School to, in alphabetical order, Messrs. Fred and George Weasley."

The audience exploded in cheers, drowning out Dumbledore's request for the twins to come forward, though they heard enough to do so. They stepped up to the podium and shook hands with Dumbledore, then turned to address the crowd.

"Thank you, we're honored," said Fred. "And very surprised. We didn't know Professor Dumbledore had this kind of sense of humor."

As the crowd chuckled, Dumbledore leaned in and said, "Oh, there's more. You'll find a few surprises embedded in your food, which I expect you to completely finish." This got a big laugh, including from the twins.

"I must say, Professor Dumbledore having a joke with us is at least as good as the award itself," said George. "And while it's true we did what we did to support Professor Dumbledore, we won't deny that it was good advertising."

"He means, for our shop, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, located at eighty-nine Diagon Alley," added Fred.

“Yes, so do come by on your Christmas vacations for an exploding Christmas tree ornament, or our Christmas fudge, which turns you into a reindeer.”

“And we’d like to say thank you to Professor Dumbledore and the staff for this award,” said Fred. “We can only hope that the students who are assigned detention for using our products will be made to keep our award polished.” They waved and stepped down, again to great applause.

Dumbledore stepped forward again. “We have one more award to present, this one for services provided this year. We usually wait until the end of the year to give such awards, but an exception is being made in this case. As I call your name, please step forward, next to me. For outstanding bravery in facing grave peril to save the life of a friend, in alphabetical order... Mr. Justin Finch-Fletchley!”

The audience burst into applause, especially the Hufflepuff table, which went wild. Grinning, Justin stepped to the front and shook Dumbledore’s hand. Harry noticed Ernie smiling and applauding along with everyone else, happy for his friend.

“Miss Hermione Granger!”

Hermione practically ran to the podium, so excited was she. She kissed Dumbledore on the cheek, both of them looking quite pleased. Then she stood next to Justin and beamed, enjoying the applause.

“Mr. Neville Longbottom!”

Neville stepped forward, and Harry suddenly noticed a woman near the teachers’ table he hadn’t known was there: Esmerelda Longbottom, Neville’s grandmother. She was smiling and applauding, if in a somewhat reserved way. When Neville got to the podium, Hermione interrupted his enjoyment of the applause to point out his grandmother. Neville, who obviously hadn’t known she was there, did a double-take and looked astonished. “She’s never come here before,” Harry barely heard Neville say to Hermione near the podium.

“Mr. Ron Weasley!”

Ron bounded up to the podium, smiling. The Weasley family applauded vigorously, especially Molly, obviously bursting with pride. Dumbledore said, "Will the four of you please choose a representative from among you to address the audience?" A finger from each of the others pointed at Hermione, who stepped forward.

"First of all, thank you all for the support you've given us over the past few days. That's a pretty good reward, as well as this award. But the best reward for what we did... he's sitting right over there," she said, gesturing toward Harry. The crowd applauded again, even more loudly. Harry was trying not to act as embarrassed as he felt. As the applause died down, Hermione continued, "I think we all would like to thank Harry for being the kind of person for whom you can do what we did without hesitation or regret. And again, thank you all." The crowd applauded one more time, as Hermione, on her way down from the podium, stopped at where Harry was sitting, leaned over, and kissed the top of his head. The other three patted his shoulder as they walked by.

"And now," said Dumbledore, "it is time to eat. I suggest that everyone check the Weasley twins from time to time, to see if anything interesting is happening." The food suddenly appeared on everyone's plates, as Neville's grandmother walked over to join the Weasleys, talking to Molly and Arthur. As Neville made his way back to his seat, Harry saw his grandmother intercept him, talk to him for a few minutes, then kiss him on the cheek before letting him return to his seat.

About five minutes into his meal, listening to Flitwick complete the story during which he'd been cut off earlier, Harry heard a burst of laughter from the crowd. He looked up to see that George had turned into a very large kitten, roughly human-sized, and standing on two hind legs, but still a kitten. Hermione and Ginny got up and started petting him as though he were a real kitten, drawing more laughs. Playing along, George rubbed his head against Hermione's shoulder as a normal cat would. After Fred had recovered from his laughter, his next bite of food turned

him into a hippogriff. Harry couldn't help but think that Dumbledore's contribution to morale-building had been almost as good as Fred and George's. Each transformation lasted for one minute, and there were four more in each twin's meal, each for a different animal.

Watching this gave Harry a warm feeling, and made him think about how he would miss Hogwarts after he graduated. Staying on as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher felt tempting, but he knew he still wanted to be an Auror. He wondered whether the Aurors ever had this much fun.

* * * * *

Harry lay in bed later that night, stuffed from the feast and contented with the warmth and companionship he'd felt. He knew his fellow students, and his fellow teachers, were as much with him as they ever had been. They didn't blame him. Nobody blamed him, to his amazement, or acted like he was in any way responsible for the deaths. Why couldn't he feel the same way?

Hugo had been right, Harry knew. In the interview, he had said what he knew he should say, and what his logical mind knew was right. Even talking to his friends, to people like Ernie, he had acted more like he was sure that he was blameless than he really was. He wondered whether he was simply trying to convince himself, or if he really did believe it when he said it. All alone, in his bed, he didn't believe it.

He knew all the arguments backwards and forwards by now. He didn't need to review them again, but he did so anyway. Voldemort had to be fought. He couldn't be fought by people who were too afraid to say his name. Harry was in an ideal position to conduct a campaign to get them to do so, and no one else was doing it. His campaign had done a great deal of good from a strategic standpoint; it could end up having saved lives, far more than were lost. Dumbledore was right, everyone was right. He couldn't argue it.

Then he thought of eight parents who would never see their children again. For whom every Christmas for the rest of their lives would be a reminder of what they had lost. He imagined the parents holding one another, still crying over their loss. Suddenly, all the arguments didn't matter a bit. It wouldn't have happened if not for him. He turned over onto his stomach, buried his head in his pillow, and started sobbing.