

CHAPTER 16

THE AURORS

Harry walked into the Great Hall on Friday a few minutes after noon, as usual, after teaching his last Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson of the week. He sat down next to Neville, across from Ron and Hermione.

“So, how was Herbology?” he asked. The other three had a Herbology class which ended just before noon on Fridays.

“Well, you remember that we have that with the Slytherins,” Ron said, looking none too happy about it. “Malfoy made his first comment about what Neville said in the paper, about his parents. Scum that he is,” he added, unnecessarily.

“It wasn’t even very clever,” added Hermione. “He just asked Neville if he’d seen his parents in the loony bin lately. We were all furious, of course. We knew he’d do it eventually, but still...”

“But Neville did good, though,” said Ron, clearly proud. “He didn’t answer for a little bit—half the class was watching, they wanted to see what Neville would do—and then Neville said, ‘I’m kind of busy now, Malfoy. Why don’t we meet at the Quidditch pitch later, and we can discuss it?’”

Harry laughed, since of course Malfoy was presently not allowed to go anywhere in the school except classes. “Good one, Neville,” he said. “Well done.”

Neville smiled. “Thanks, Harry. Professor Sprout came by later and gave me a big smile. Malfoy was really angry, and most of the class laughed, even some Slytherins, mostly the girls. I’m sure she wanted to, too.” Neville’s odd emphasis on the word ‘she’ made it clear he was referring to Pansy, whose name they didn’t want to use in public in case they were overheard.

“I’m sure she laughed on the inside, Neville,” said Hermione. “I should ask her about that tonight.”

“Oh, that’s right, you gave her the notebooks on Tuesday,” said Harry, keeping his voice down. “How’s that going?”

“Really good. We’ve talked for about two hours a night so far.”

“Wow,” said Ron. “How are you going to get your studying done?”

“It would be a bit of a problem if it continued for any length of time,” she admitted. “I think it’s just so new to her right now, having someone to talk to with no set time limit and no danger of being caught, like there always is when she meets Harry. She’s just so keen to talk, it’s like she’s been really hungry for a long time, and now she can finally eat almost as much as she wants. I think she’ll get full at some point. Anyway, I do some studying while waiting for her answers, but I’m just not going to tell her I can’t talk to her because I have to study. She’s a nice person, and she deserves our support.”

“Yes, she does,” Harry agreed. “It really is amazing what a nice person she’s turned out to be. She was really good to me the night I woke up from the curse.”

“How do you mean, Harry?” asked Neville.

“She was the one who was there, and she had to tell me about the ones who’d died. I just lost it, totally broke down. She just held me for a very long time, tried to make me feel better. Nothing was going to, of course, but she really wanted to. When you feel like I felt that night, you just need to know that you have a friend there, that somebody really wants to help you, even if they can’t. It was really good of her.”

“Well, you know how she feels about you, Harry,” said Hermione. “I know she was happy to be able to do it. But I’ll tell her what you said.”

“How are you doing with that now, Harry?” Neville asked.

“You mean, the fact that the people died? It still bothers me, of course. Why do you ask?”

Neville paused, uncertain about whether he should say anything or not. “I... I’ve heard you.” He looked apologetic. “I think you’ve cried every night now, for the past five nights.”

Harry was embarrassed, but not mortified; he knew they would be understanding, even Ron, and wouldn’t tease him about it. “Could you hear it, Ron?”

Ron nodded uncomfortably. “I don’t want to intrude, Harry, I really don’t. But those rooms are pretty quiet. I think you’re trying to be quiet, you’re just not quite managing it. We’re concerned about you.”

“Well, I guess I’m not sure what the normal mourning period is for people whose deaths you’ve...” Harry went silent, knowing how the word ‘caused’ would sound to the others, and to himself. He figured his meaning was clear anyway.

“Harry...” Hermione’s tone and expression were pleading. “Look, what if, one Hogsmeade weekend I said I wanted to meet you in front of the Owl Office. You got there, were waiting for me, and a Death Eater snuck up on you and killed you. That wouldn’t be my fault in any way, but I could blame myself, saying that you’d still be alive if I hadn’t asked you to meet me there. That’s what this situation is like.”

“It’s not exactly the same, since I knowingly put people’s lives in danger,” Harry said. “But I do see what you mean. It’s just that... I know what all the arguments are, and they make sense. There’s just something in me that won’t let it go, that won’t let me off the hook. Probably it’s because they were so young, and death is so... permanent. I was able to forgive myself for you getting Cursed, at least partly because it’s the kind of thing that, though it’s horrible, you can get past. This is different.”

“But Harry, Voldemort has to be fought... I know, I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know, it’s not rational. And I know I would have no idea how long would be a normal time for you to feel the way you do. All we’re saying is

that we're concerned. So... please don't be mad at us, Harry, but we went and talked to Professor Dumbledore this morning. We just wanted to know what he thought."

Harry shoved down his initial impulse to be angry; he could understand why they were concerned. He was silent for a moment, then muttered, "Bet I know whose idea that was."

Ron glared at him. "Well, then, you'd be wrong, because it was mine." Harry looked up, startled. Ron was giving him a 'what do you think of that?' look. "I may have the emotional range of a thimble, or whatever Hermione said last year, but I'm not too thick to know that there's a problem here. I thought Dumbledore might be able to do something to help you, or reassure us that it was normal."

"And what did he say?" asked Harry, interested.

"I don't think he said whether it was normal or not," said Hermione, "but he said it wasn't surprising. He said that he doubts that a sixteen-year-old has ever been put into this kind of position, and that this sort of thing may be the hardest thing for you about your position of leadership, maybe even harder than facing Voldemort. He said it's hard for him, and he's been doing it for many years."

Ron nodded, impressed. "He said he's lost count of the number of times he's cried for people who have died, all the times he's irrationally blamed himself. That made us feel a bit better. But then he said that however good your heart is, that's how much you'd suffer."

"That made us feel worse," said Hermione. "Basically, he's concerned for you too, but knows there's no way out except through, and the first time is always going to be the hardest. Not that it gets easier, he said, but just because it's the kind of thing that nothing can prepare you for. He also said that you can't truly understand it unless you've experienced it. I think that was his way of telling us nicely that we really can't know what you're going through, which I suppose is fair enough. It doesn't mean we don't want to help you, though."

Harry sighed. "I know, and I appreciate it, both of you. I don't know what you can do, though, or even what I can do. It's almost like something I can't control, as if my body is doing something it needs to do."

Hermione nodded. "Maybe it is, for all we know. Maybe that's why Dumbledore's not that concerned. Well, he is, but you know what I mean. Like I said, he doesn't seem to think it's all that surprising. I expect he would try to do something specific to help you if he thought there was something really wrong."

"If I'm still crying about it in a month or so, then I guess I'll suspect that there is," Harry said. "In the meantime, I guess we'll just see how it goes." He pulled up his bag from the floor, and started to dig some letters out of it. He had been getting more mail as a result of the Hogsmeade attack and the latest Hugo Brantell article, and had taken to shoving it all into his bag in the morning, rather than try to look at it as he ate breakfast. He paused as a standard Muggle-type letter fell out of a larger envelope. "Hey, this one's from my Aunt Petunia!" he said in surprise.

The others were surprised too; even Neville, who knew the least about Harry's family situation, knew enough to know that this was very strange. Harry started to open it.

"Hey, Harry, how do they send you mail, anyway? They don't have access to owls, after all," asked Ron.

"I guess you wouldn't know this, Ron, but—" started Hermione.

"I wish I had a Galleon for every time I heard you say those words," grumbled Ron.

"—Muggles post letters to one central, Muggle-recognized address, where they're received by wizards and then forwarded on," she finished, as if Ron hadn't interrupted.

"I must say, I'm surprised she even knows the address," said Harry as he read the letter. "Well, not surprisingly, she's annoyed. I knew she wasn't just writing to say hello. We've gotten ten owls in the past three days, including three copies of

the article about you. It's nice that your friends saved your life, but what does that have to do with us? You even say in the article that we have no interest in wizarding affairs, and they go and send us things anyway! Can't they read? What is their problem? I gather they feel we should be interested, which they have no business deciding. Can't you do something about these people? You know how we feel about owls.' It goes on a bit more, but you get the general drift of it."

Ron made an unpleasant face. "Yes, Harry, it's nice that you survived a few deadly attacks, but the real problem is all that unwanted mail. The poor woman." Neville just shook his head.

"Like I can control what people in the wizarding community do," Harry agreed.

"Oh, dear, I hope nobody got the idea to write to my parents and tell them what I'm doing, or worse yet, send them the article," said Hermione anxiously. "I hate to think what they would think. Hopefully I'm not famous enough for them to bother."

"Save Harry's life a few more times and you really will be famous," said Ron.

"Aha, a disincentive," pointed out Harry.

Hermione gave Harry a 'be serious' look. "I'll deal with being as famous as I have to be, to keep you alive," she said.

"That's the spirit," Ron said. "No sacrifice too great."

"It would be a sacrifice," Harry said. "Believe me, I'm in a position to know."

"Harry, that makes me wonder... I've heard you complain about being famous, but are there ever any advantages to it?" asked Neville. "I don't mean people getting all excited because you're Harry Potter, I know you don't like that. I mean other things."

Harry thought hard; it was an interesting question. "Well, there's a lot of goodwill I get by being Harry Potter, but that doesn't seem to actually affect me very often. Also, sometimes when people are being nice to me, it's hard to tell

whether that has anything to do with it or not. I guess there probably are advantages, but they're not obvious too often. Do you think I seem ungrateful about it?"

"I wouldn't use the word 'ungrateful,'" Neville said apologetically, "but I just noticed that you don't have much that's good to say about it. So I was just wondering."

Harry got back to his food, thinking about it. If only people didn't stare so much, he thought, it wouldn't be so bad. After a few bites, he opened up another letter and read it. It was along the same lines as was usual, with general praise for him and encouragement of what he was doing. Harry wished he could appreciate such praise more, but especially after the deaths, he was in no mood for praise of any kind.

He opened the next letter, an official-looking one. As he read it, he had a feeling of incredulity, as if this couldn't possibly be happening. Finishing it, he put his head in his hands. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ron looking at him. "What?" said Ron.

Wondering what Ron's reaction would be, Harry handed him the letter without comment. Ron's eyes practically bulged as he read it. "It's the people who make Chocolate Frogs... they want to put Harry on a card!" Neville looked awestruck, as did Ron. Hermione looked impressed, but not awed.

"Well, if you think about it, it's not that surprising," she said, as Ron and Neville looked at her as if she didn't quite appreciate the honor being done Harry. "Harry's always been famous, and that's one of the things they want when they put someone on a card. But the person on the card also has to have accomplished something in particular, something really noteworthy. Harry's done two such things this year: the spell, and defying Voldemort in the face of extreme duress. Considering that, Harry's an ideal candidate for a card." She regarded Ron and Neville for a moment;

they still wore rather awed expressions. “Honestly, I think you two are more impressed with this than the spell Harry came up with.”

“If you collected Chocolate Frog cards, Hermione, you’d be more impressed too,” replied Ron.

Neville nodded his agreement. “They only make them for wizards who are really legendary,” he said. “I’m not sure, but I think that Dumbledore’s the only living wizard who has a card.”

“Well, Harry deserves it, of course, but I’m sure the Chocolate Frog people are thinking that this will really boost sales,” Hermione said.

Ron and Neville looked at her as if she had insulted Harry. “Hermione!” said Neville scoldingly. Harry was surprised; he had never heard Neville use such a tone. I guess I’d better get used to Neville changing, he thought.

“What?” she asked, defensively. “I said he deserved it.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter, because I’m not going to let them do it,” said Harry. “I get embarrassed enough as it is with fuss being made over me, I don’t need this.” Ron and Neville looked at him as if he were crazy, even though they knew him well enough to have predicted his reaction.

Hermione answered him. “Don’t be silly, Harry, of course you have to let them do it. We know you, and we know you’d rather not. But you have to.”

Harry’s tone was almost hostile. “Why? Why do I have to?”

She used the tone that had always annoyed him, the tone that suggested that what she was saying was blindingly obvious, and that she really shouldn’t even have to be saying it to him. “Harry, the fact that you’re the Boy Who Lived will be mentioned on the card, of course, but you’d be worthy of one in any case. But you have to do it because you’re a public figure, a symbol of the fight against Voldemort. You survived him as a baby, you survived his return, you drove him out of your mind. You’re very symbolic now, and having you on a card will be a very good thing for the wizarding world. Children will get your card, and it’ll help them understand what you’ve done and what you’re trying to do. They’ll identify with you, and want

to do what you've done. That's the sort of spirit we need in the wizarding community. A card would be a way of reaching children, in the same way Hugo's articles have reached adults. You have to do this, Harry. It would be a waste not to." Harry closed his eyes; he couldn't believe that this had happened. He could see Hermione's point, but just felt he couldn't deal with it. Hermione saw this, and persisted. "Harry, I know what you're thinking. You already feel bad about what happened in Hogsmeade, and you're in even less of a mood than ever to be considered any kind of hero or example to others. I understand, and I might feel the same way if I were you. But this could be, surely will be, good for the morale of the community, especially children. You have to put that above your personal feelings."

Harry still didn't speak, but now the others were waiting for him. After a minute, he finally said, "I can't say I don't see your point, Hermione. It's just hard for me to accept, is all. I don't feel real good about myself right now, and this seems... way out of proportion, somehow."

"Harry, Hermione's right," said Neville, looking at Harry earnestly. "You have to stop thinking about yourself, you have to think about how this affects others. You probably didn't think about this, but this will mean that I'll be able to say that I once helped save the life of someone who has a Chocolate Frog card. Please don't take that away from me." Only after he finished speaking did a small smile cross Neville's face.

Harry couldn't help but smile. "I'm sorry, Neville, I shouldn't be so selfish," he said in the same vein. "Tell you what, I'll go talk to Dumbledore. If he says I should do it, then I'll do it. Don't worry, Hermione, I'll tell him what you said."

She looked almost smug. "That's okay, Harry. He'll tell you what I said."

Five minutes later, Dumbledore did just that. "Of course, you should let them do it, Harry. It is quite an honor, one of which especially your recent actions have made you deserving." He went on to say roughly what Hermione had said, which Harry

told Dumbledore, who smiled. “Well, there you are. If Hermione agrees with me, then I must be right.”

“I’m sure she’ll say it’s the other way around, sir,” Harry said. “All right, I’ll do it. I just don’t like the idea right now, coming so soon after... Ron and Hermione told me that they were in here earlier, and about what. They told me that you seemed to think it wasn’t out of line with what happened. How long do you think it will last? How long will it be until I’m able to go to bed and not think about it, not dwell on the families, and so forth? I always imagine them...” He trailed off, knowing Dumbledore knew what he was saying.

In Dumbledore’s eyes, Harry saw the same compassion he had seen the first time they had talked after Hogsmeade. “We cannot know how long it will take, or even should take. Few people are put in the position that you are in, that I am in. It is one of the hardest things a person can do. Most people do not understand this, which is why it will not be cited on your Chocolate Frog card. But it is true nonetheless. You cannot be quite the same person after this happens as you were before.

“You see, Harry, your heart and your mind are fighting a struggle. Your mind is telling you all the practical aspects of the situation, all the arguments that I have made and Hermione has made and that you know are correct. Your heart refuses to accept the death and suffering of others, and desperately wishes you not to be a part of the equation in any way. What is happening now is your heart expressing its grief over what has happened, and its desire that nothing like this happen again. For you to function as a leader, you must respect and honor your heart, and listen to it, but ultimately do what your head tells you is of the greatest benefit to all. Your heart only knows the suffering that is here and now.

“This type of theme recurs. You experienced it first when Hermione was Cursed, and even referring to last year, I said a few months ago that sometimes we must suffer damage in the short run to avoid greater damage in the long run. Also, recall our conversation after the confrontation in the Department of Mysteries. I told you of my great mistake, that I cared for you so much, too much to tell you what you

needed to know. I said, ‘What did I care if numbers of nameless and faceless people and creatures were slaughtered in the vague future, if in the here and now, you were happy?’ I listened to my heart over my head, and Sirius died when he need not have.”

Harry winced. “Sir, that wasn’t your fault—“

”I do not mean to assign blame to myself. I know that the fault for his death lies with Bellatrix Lestrange and Voldemort. I merely point out that the causal relationship between my actions and Sirius’s death is greater than the one between yours and the Hogsmeade deaths. You cannot blame yourself for the Hogsmeade deaths and not blame me for Sirius’s. But the point I was originally making was the heart’s focus on the here and now. I fell into that trap by waiting too long to tell you of the prophecy. It is the kind of trap I have usually avoided in the past, when it came to people I felt less close to than you. You, even knowing all the facts, would have been tempted to sacrifice great long-term interests for short-term ones, because of your heart. So it is not surprising that your heart should rebel at what happened in Hogsmeade. As Professor Snape said, what you have done will very likely end up saving more lives than were lost. But you cannot see, or easily imagine, the happiness, the comfort, the wholeness of the families who did not lose someone they would have lost, if not for your actions. It may be useful for you to try to do so.”

Harry thought a bit, then nodded. “That makes sense, sir, I’ll try to do that. I just... never thought I would have people’s deaths on my conscience. I feared it a few times, when Ron and Hermione went into danger with me. But this time it actually happened, just in a different way. It’s been very hard for me to adjust to that.”

“As I have said, it will always be hard to deal with, especially with this being the first time. You have done some very brave things, Harry, and some very hard things. I think it would not harm anyone, or dishonor anyone’s memory, were you to enjoy being given a Chocolate Frog card.”

“I remember Fred and George saying, when the Ministry had you removed from those posts last year, that you didn’t care what they did so long as they didn’t take you off the Chocolate Frog cards. You do enjoy being on them, don’t you?” asked Harry, his tone making it sound more like a statement than a question.

Dumbledore smiled. “It was a joke with more than a little truth in it. The posts from which I was removed are important, but also political, which was shown by the ease with which I was removed. The Chocolate Frog cards are not at all political, and so are a more reliable indicator of the esteem in which I am held. I was very flattered to be given one, especially while I was still alive. It is quite an honor. It is also good because many students see my card before coming to Hogwarts, causing them to tend to treat me with a certain respect.”

Harry couldn’t help but smile. “Sir, all you need to do to get people’s respect is walk into the room.”

“Why, you may yet cause me to blush, Harry. Thank you. But not all people, obviously, if they do not like what I am saying, as we saw last year. That is why it is best not to fall in love with fame; it can turn on you in a second. But it appears that for you, it is enough of a struggle merely to tolerate fame. I assume that is part of the reason you were inclined to resist the card.”

Harry nodded. “I’ve never been happy with fame, which is funny, considering how some people lust after it. I guess I have to get used to the idea that by doing what I do, I’m kind of stuck with it. I don’t know if I can ever enjoy it, but maybe I can try not to be so bothered by it.”

“That is a good idea. We must always try to accept that which cannot be changed. In this situation your fame is helpful. Not to you personally, but to the cause you lead. In particular, note how there is symmetry in the reason for your fame, and your activities now. You have always been a symbol of resistance to Voldemort, and you are doubly so now.”

Harry was starting to accept that this was true, and if it was, he may as well make the most of it. “Sir, do you think the Chocolate Frog people would send me a few

dozen of the card they make of me if I asked them to? I can think of some people who would probably like one.”

“I am glad to hear you say that,” said Dumbledore with amusement. “And yes, I believe that while the company would prefer that everyone buy more Chocolate Frogs in order to get your card, they would not say no to you. By all means, mention it to them in your answer.”

Harry got up to leave. “I will. And thank you, sir. Talking to you always makes me feel better.”

“I am very glad, Harry. Perhaps you should do so more often, in that case.”

Harry chuckled. “Maybe I should. By the way, did I ever tell you... on the train to Hogwarts, in my first year, the first Chocolate Frog card I ever got was yours.”

“It was obviously fate,” said Dumbledore. Harry couldn’t tell whether he was joking or not, then decided it didn’t matter. He smiled and left.

Harry saw Dumbledore again relatively soon, as Friday after lunch was when he had his Defense Against the Dark Arts class with Dumbledore. He was talking with Ernie and Justin when Dumbledore entered. As usual, the classroom went silent.

“Good day, everyone. Today’s topic will be dueling,” There was a murmur of interest; they had never studied this before, and it was considered a more interesting topic than usual, based on dueling playing an important part in wizard legend, as well as popular fiction. Harry felt that for he and his friends, it held even more interest, as they might well need to use it.

“Dueling looks like wizards simply waving their wands at each other, but it is very complicated, and difficult to master. Several types of ability factor into one’s dueling skill. Firstly, one must have good mastery of silent spellwork.” Harry saw a few people look at him. “One cannot vocalize one’s spells in dueling, since the spells are sent by the opponent so rapidly. One would lose the duel quickly. Secondly, one must have excellent tactical instincts. Good reflexes and steady nerves are also of great importance.

“From a defensive point of view, one should keep oneself protected at all times, using the Protection Charm. But as there are some spells against which the Protection Charm is less than effective, one must keep on the offensive as well. In advanced dueling, most do not even use the Protection Charm, but rather use their own spells to both attack and block what the other person sends. That aspect of dueling will be covered next year; for now, we will focus on the fundamentals.”

Dumbledore went on to explain the details of how it worked, and showed them how to practice using the ‘Blue’ spell. They paired off and practiced. After a while, Dumbledore asked them to change partners, so Harry changed from Hermione to Neville. Practicing with Neville, Harry found it a little easy to get through Neville’s defenses, so Harry called Dumbledore over and they both worked with him on it. Neville was soon able to get the Protection Charm working fluidly in conjunction with his offensive spells. After another ten minutes of practice, Harry suddenly found it very hard indeed to get past Neville’s defenses. He saw the same kind of intensity on Neville’s face as he had seen in the D.A. last year, and was heartened. “Very good, everyone, you are picking it up well,” said Dumbledore after another ten minutes of practice. “Now, before we move on to our next subject, we will have a small tournament to determine who is the most proficient in this class at this time. The winner of this class’s tournament will then compete against the winner from the other sixth-year class. The winner will receive a small prize that I have donated: a candle that never burns out, and will emit any aroma which is possible for a candle, on request.” Harry saw Hermione’s eyes light up; she obviously wanted it. Neville glanced at Harry; he had seen it too. Harry decided that if he won, he would give it to her.

Dumbledore split them up into pairs, and each dueled in front of the class. With sixteen students in the class, it worked perfectly: there would be eight winners, then four in the next round, then two, and finally one. Each match was decided by two wins out of three; a win was achieved by turning the opponent blue.

Dumbledore appeared to be using a kind of seeding system; it seemed as if the eight strongest students were paired up against the eight weakest ones, and the strongest ones won their matches. Harry beat Parvati, Ron beat Seamus, Neville beat Dean, and Hermione beat Hannah. In the second round, Harry beat Justin, while Neville beat Ernie, much to Ernie's obvious annoyance. Ron and Hermione also won, and so would play each other, and Harry would play Neville. Hermione took the first bout from Ron, but he came back and won the next two, to advance to the final. Hermione looked unusually disappointed.

Harry knew he would have a tough time with Neville, but he expected to win. Their wands flashed as they started; Neville was quick, at least as quick as Harry, and Harry again saw a look of fierce determination on Neville's face. He obviously wanted this badly. Neville finally got in under Harry's defenses, as Harry saw his hand turn blue. The class gasped lightly; it was clear that they, too, expected Harry to win. In the second bout, Harry focused more on defense, and it went on for a minute and a half, far longer than any other bout, most of which had lasted less than fifteen seconds. Harry finally broke through for the win. In the deciding bout, Harry tried to focus harder. It went on for over a minute, but eventually Harry made a mistake and saw his hand turn blue again. The class truly gasped this time, and applauded at how hard-fought the bouts were. Harry smiled and shook Neville's hand. "You did great, Neville," he said.

Satisfied and pleased, Neville turned to face Ron. The bouts were much shorter than Neville's with Harry; Neville took Ron out in less than thirty seconds each time, and again got applause from the class. Ron shook Neville's hand as well, and moved over to where Harry was standing. "How did he get that good?" Ron whispered.

Harry shrugged. "He was really determined, that's all I know for sure."

"Excellent, Neville, that was very well done. The win over Harry was especially impressive. We all know that Harry's skills with a wand are excellent, and given that his non-vocalized spells are as effective as his vocalized ones, you had a handicap to

overcome. Most impressive indeed.” Neville glowed, but still looked determined. “Now, I have arranged for the winner from the other class to come here. Let us see if he has arrived.” Dumbledore went to the door and opened it, and in walked Draco Malfoy, followed by Professor Snape, obviously Malfoy’s escort.

Suddenly Harry understood the reason for Neville’s attitude. At first Harry wondered if Neville had just wanted the candle, but now he realized that Neville had guessed or known that Malfoy had been the winner in the other class, and that he badly wanted to beat Malfoy in retaliation for his remark about his parents.

Harry walked up to Neville and whispered, “You can do it, Neville. Go get him.” Malfoy stood at the front of the class, smug as ever. Harry had little doubt that he had practiced with his father, but probably not too much with the ‘Blue’ spell. “The winner will be determined by three wins out of five,” Dumbledore announced.

“Will this class’s champion please step forward.”

Neville stepped forward, stopping opposite Malfoy. Malfoy’s jaw dropped; he was not bothering to hide his astonishment. “Sorry, Malfoy,” said Neville, grinning. “I know you were hoping for Harry.” The class laughed; Malfoy looked more smug than ever.

Dumbledore started them on their first bout, and five seconds later, Malfoy was a deep shade of blue, again looking astonished. Watching the bout, Harry felt that Malfoy had been so overconfident that he could break through Neville’s defense that he had neglected his own defense. The second bout was again won by Neville, this time taking about thirty seconds. In the third bout, Malfoy was clearly taking Neville seriously, a look of determination nearly matching Neville’s was on his face. A little past the one-minute mark, Malfoy turned blue, and it was over. The class had not cheered for Neville’s first two wins, not wanting to celebrate prematurely, but they let it all out now, cheering wildly. After a few seconds, Dumbledore quieted them; Harry saw Neville give Malfoy a very satisfied smile. “That was very well played, on both sides,” he said. Harry didn’t think so; he was sure he could have beaten Malfoy, and he thought probably Ron could have as well. “Thank you, Mr.

Malfoy, Professor Snape, for coming by.” A very angry-looking Malfoy was led away by Snape.

People surrounded Neville, giving him their hearty congratulations; the Hufflepuffs looked as happy as the Gryffindors. Dumbledore walked up to Neville and handed him the candle. “Congratulations, Neville. You did excellently.” Harry had never seen Neville looking happier. “Well, those long bouts took more time than I had expected, and now we are out of time,” Dumbledore announced. “Thank you for your attention and effort. I will see you again next Friday.”

Most people left, but a few hung back to look at the candle. “Strawberry!” said Neville, and almost immediately, Harry could smell strawberries in the air. Everyone was impressed. As they were packing up to go, Neville approached Hermione. “I was pretty sure I noticed before that you really wanted to get this,” said Neville. “I didn’t care about it that much, I just wanted to beat Malfoy. I’d like you to have it.” Hermione looked embarrassed. “Oh, Neville, I couldn’t—“

”Please,” Neville insisted. “I really want you to have it.”

Hermione took it, looking at Neville with great affection. “Thank you very much, Neville. I’ll always value this, especially because of the circumstances under which I got it.” She leaned forward and kissed Neville on the cheek. Neville blushed furiously.

“Wow, Neville, it looks like she got you with the ‘Red’ spell,” joked Ron, as everyone laughed, including Neville.

Harry patted Neville on the shoulder. “That was a really nice thing to do.”

“You were going to give it to her too, Harry. I could tell,” responded Neville.

“Yes, but you were the one who won,” Harry said. “That must have been satisfying.”

Neville just smiled, picked up his bag, and headed out as the rest followed.

The days got colder as winter approached, and as Christmas decorations went up, the atmosphere became more festive. The school had not forgotten the four who

had died at Hogsmeade; among other reminders, their desks remained empty and unmoved in all their classes, including Harry's. Harry had stopped crying at night shortly after his talk with Dumbledore, but still missed them and was pained to think of them, especially when he saw their empty desks in the classes. But people also recognized that life had to go on, and they welcomed the holiday cheer. Adding to the cheer was Malfoy's continued confinement, which was very good for the overall atmosphere. Pansy had told Harry that Malfoy's absence had an excellent effect on the Slytherin common room. Crabbe and Goyle, now rudderless, kept to themselves and were very quiet, as were others who had accepted Malfoy as their leader. The first years also reported that life in the common room was far better, and they felt that Malfoy's power was now sufficiently broken that he would be unable to make the common room his domain again after he got back. Pansy felt that they were probably right, and wished aloud that Malfoy's confinement would last until he graduated. Harry tried hard to restrain himself from again suggesting that she come out into the open.

Shortly after waking up on the last Friday before Christmas vacation started, Harry walked from his dormitory to the Great Hall. He took his usual seat opposite Ron and Hermione, next to Neville.

"So, Harry, are you leaving for your visit with the Aurors tomorrow?" asked Neville. Harry nodded. "I leave tomorrow morning, and stay until Monday night, after which I go straight to the Burrow." He smiled at Ron. "You have to spend Christmas with family, after all."

Ron smiled back. "Mum'll be very happy to hear you say that."

"What will they be doing with you?" asked Neville.

"I'm not sure. I know they want me to work on the spell with them, since they still haven't got it yet. I'm not quite sure what else they have in mind. Cassandra's been a little vague about that."

“Cassandra Banks?” asked Neville, eyebrows raised. Harry nodded. “I know her,” said Neville. “She’s really nice. She was a close friend of my mother’s, they became Aurors at about the same time. She visits my gran and I occasionally.”

“Well, she seems very nice in letters,” Harry agreed. “I’ll be looking forward to meeting her, and I’ll mention you to her.”

“Have you heard from any others besides her?” asked Hermione.

“Just Tonks, last week. It was to confirm stuff about this weekend, but it seemed like mainly an excuse to tease me. She said something about trying to find some mistletoe,” he said as the others laughed. “A few other things like that.”

Hermione was still chuckling. “I wonder if she’s just letting you know that she’s going to have some fun with you while you’re there. She’s probably going to massively flirt with you.”

“What should I do?” asked Harry apprehensively. Hermione barely managed not to roll her eyes.

“Enjoy it, Harry. Tease her back, flirt with her back. I think it’s safe to say that the age difference is enough that she’s not really serious, but it’s also safe to say that she finds you at least somewhat attractive, or she wouldn’t do it. You like her; just treat her like you would Ginny or I.”

“Yeah, but you and Ginny don’t flirt with me,” Harry pointed out.

“Maybe we should, so you get used to it,” she suggested, smiling mischievously.

“Oh, please don’t,” Harry pleaded, as Ron and Neville laughed. “I’m confused enough already about this sort of thing, I don’t need to start wondering about you and Ginny.”

“You’ll be fine, Harry, trust me,” she said earnestly. “Don’t worry about it. Just have a sense of humor, you sometimes do.”

The morning owls flew in, and a small box was dumped on Harry’s part of the table, right next to his food. His first reaction was to wonder if the owl was deliberately trying to avoid hitting his food. He opened the box. “What is it?” asked Ron.

Harry read the letter attached to it first, then opened the smaller package inside the package. He handed Ron a Harry Potter Chocolate Frog card, saying, "According to the letter, these will be announced on the first of the year. I'd rather people around here didn't know about them until then."

Ron looked at the card. "Cool!" he enthused, as Hermione leaned over to take a look. "Good picture, Harry," she commented. Harry handed Neville a card so he could see. "Read the back, Ron!" said Hermione.

Ron turned it over and started reading. "Also known as the Boy Who Lived, Harry Potter at age one was the first ever to survive a Killing Curse, delivered by the evil Dark wizard Voldemort... they used his name?!" Ron exclaimed, agog, while still trying to keep his voice down. "It's not just the letter 'V' followed by eight dashes, they actually print the name! This is the first time I've ever seen the name in writing!"

Harry nodded. "That was my only condition for letting them make the card. No 'Dark Lord,' no 'You-Know-Who.' They had to use his name, in full. They weren't happy about it, but they were willing to do it. The person who wrote me back said, 'We have decided that if you can risk the Cruciatius Curse, the least we can do is print his name on a card.'"

Hermione smiled at him proudly. "Here's another good thing to come of what you did, Harry. This may seem small, but you inspired people in all sorts of ways. After what you went through, people aren't going to be angry at this sort of thing anymore; they'd be ashamed to be angry after you suffered what you did, for them."

Ron continued reading. "Currently Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts at the age of sixteen, he braved the Cruciatius Curse for five nights against Voldemort before finding an amazing new shield which blocks the Curse. To date, only his mentor, Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, has mastered the spell. He is also the youngest wizard ever to be chosen as a companion by a phoenix. Well, they don't have that much space, I suppose. Or they could have mentioned the Chamber of Secrets or the Sorcerer's Stone."

“Those events aren’t as well known,” Hermione pointed out. “They’d be a bit hard to explain on a card. How many did you have them send you, Harry?”

Harry looked somewhat embarrassed. “Fifty,” he said.

“Fifty?” Ron exclaimed. “What are you going to do with fifty?”

Harry sighed. He wasn’t looking forward to telling them this. “I’ll tell you, but first you have to promise not to tease me about it.” He didn’t take his eyes off Ron.

“Why are you looking at me?” Ron asked, defensively.

Hermione looked at Ron as if he were being especially dense. “Because he knows Neville and I won’t tease him about it, Ron.”

“Well, how can I promise that if I don’t know what it is?” asked Ron. Harry just kept looking at him. “Oh, all right,” Ron finally conceded.

“This goes against my usual inclinations, which is probably why I’m sensitive about it,” Harry said. “But I know they’ll appreciate it. I’m going to sign and personalize them—you know, like, ‘to David,’ then sign my name—and give them to all the first years as a Christmas present.” Harry looked around for any mocking reactions.

Predictably, Hermione smiled. “Harry, that’s so nice of you, they’ll be thrilled. I don’t think Ron would have teased you anyway, though. It’s too close to something Malfoy would taunt you about. I assume that’s why you’re sensitive about it.”

“I just don’t like the way it sounds, like I’m so full of myself that I think handing out autographed cards of myself is such a good thing. I’m sure some people will think that after they find out. But I know the first years will like it, so I’m doing it anyway.”

Ron looked disappointed. “C’mon, Harry, have a little more faith in me than that. There’s plenty of things to have a go at you about without stooping to something that Malfoy would do. It is nice of you.”

Harry was surprised; Ron didn’t have to go quite that far, but he appreciated it.

“Okay, Neville, what do you think?”

Neville did not respond; by way of answer, he held up the card, and proffered it to Harry, along with a pen, his eyes making a silent request. Ron and Hermione

chuckled, and Harry smiled. He took them, and wrote, “Neville– thanks for your friendship.” Then he signed it, and gave it back. “I could have written more, but these cards aren’t very big.”

Neville read the card, and smiled broadly. “That’s just fine, Harry, thank you. I’m very happy to have gotten the first one.”

Hermione had gotten out a pen. “That means I get the second,” she said.

“I guess this is why I had them send fifty instead of forty,” said Harry. “I didn’t know if you guys would want them, but I wanted them just in case.” He took the pen, thought for a minute, then wrote, “Hermione– I love you,” then signed. She took the card, looked at it, and melted. “Oh, Harry... thank you...”

Looking uncertain, Ron said, “I want one too, but I want to know how you’re going to sign it first.”

Harry chuckled. “If you don’t watch out, Ron, I’ll sign it the same way I signed Hermione’s.” She showed hers to Ron, who groaned, then to Neville, who laughed. Harry thought for another minute, then wrote, ‘Ron– thanks for Keeping me safe,’ then signed, and handed it to Ron. “There you go, a Quidditch reference and everything.”

Ron looked at it and smiled. “Thanks, Harry, that’s good.”

“So, except for the ones for the first years, you’ve got seven left,” said Hermione. Assuming everyone wants one, I’m trying to figure out who’ll get the rest. Let’s see... Ginny, Pansy, Justin, Ernie, Hagrid... right?” Harry nodded. “That leaves two more,” she said. “Oh, Professor Dumbledore! He’d probably want one. Also, maybe Fred and George, they could share one. Sometimes it seems like they’re the same person anyway.”

“Ginny, I’ll just give one, I have a feeling she’ll want one,” Harry said. “Pansy too, I just hope she’s careful where she keeps it. Hagrid, maybe I’ll ask him if he wants one. It wouldn’t surprise me if he did. But Justin and Ernie, I’m too embarrassed to just ask them. If one of you wants to do it, you can, or if they ask after they come out, I’ll give them one. I don’t know about Professor Dumbledore.”

“I think he’ll want one, Harry. Mainly for sentimental reasons, and we all know how he feels about you,” said Hermione.

“You may be right... thinking about people I’m close to, I can’t help but think, Sirius would have gotten a big kick out of this, really enjoyed that I was on a card.”

The others were somber. “Yes, he would’ve,” agreed Hermione. “I can hear that laugh of his. And he would’ve told you that your father would’ve been proud, too. And I’m sure he would’ve been right.”

Harry felt conflicting emotions, as he now often did when he thought of his father. Part of him felt proud, as Hermione had intended, but... before his last Occlumency lesson with Snape last year, whenever he thought of his father, in his mind’s eye he saw the cheerful, happily married young man in the pictures Hagrid had collected for him. But now, he also saw an arrogant, vain fifteen-year-old being deliberately cruel. He knew that his father had changed and become a better person, but he still couldn’t help but see that image, and feel a flash of the shame associated with it. He wondered if and when he would be able to set that aside.

He focused on the more positive image, and knew that as usual, Hermione was right. “Thanks,” he said. “So, what are you doing for Christmas vacation? With your parents?”

“Yes, I don’t think they have anything special planned,” she said. “I’m sure I can make it over to the Burrow once or twice. My parents will understand.”

“How about you, Neville?” asked Ron. “Do you think you can make it over at some point?”

Neville looked very pleased to have been asked; he had never been to the Weasleys’ before. “I’m sure I can, anytime except Christmas day. Just let me know when you want me over.”

Ron nodded. “Just so you know, it’s not the most posh place in the world...”

Harry hated to think that Ron was embarrassed about his home, and said, “I think it’s great. It’s got lots of character.”

Hermione agreed. “Really, Ron, do you think Neville’s going to care about that? That’s the kind of thing someone like Malfoy would go on about.” Neville simply looked at Ron, but his meaning was clear: he didn’t care what it looked like.

“All right, all right,” Ron conceded. “Just making sure. I’ll stick my head in the fireplace to let you know when’s a good time to come, Neville.”

“Too bad Pansy can’t come,” said Harry, making sure to keep his voice down, as they did whenever discussing Pansy. “That’d be nice for her, to be able to do something like that.”

“How do you know she can’t come?” asked Hermione.

“You can ask her if you want,” said Ron. “You’re a family member, remember, that means you can invite people, just like any of us.”

“If I was like Tonks, I could make my hair red,” Harry joked. “No, I was thinking she couldn’t come because of security issues. She’s suggested that she has more of a formal relationship with her parents, and she would either have to lie about where she was going or tell them but make sure they kept it a secret. Also, what if Malfoy sticks his head in her fireplace and asks where she is? There’s just too many things that could go wrong. It seems too risky.”

“But you don’t know her home situation that well, Harry,” Hermione pointed out. “You could be making wrong assumptions. Maybe you should ask her, and she can tell you whether it’s possible or not.”

Harry looked doubtful. “If I asked her that, she’d tell me it was possible without even considering security, she’d be so happy for the chance,” he said. “She’s not going to consider the risks in a way that I’d feel comfortable with.”

“Isn’t that her choice?” Hermione countered. “Harry, remember when you were stuck in Privet Drive for over a month, a year and a half ago? You were furious when you got out, we’d never seen you so angry. You were so isolated. You didn’t care about security, you just wanted some friendly human contact. You were angry at Dumbledore for valuing your security over your happiness. Do you want to do the same thing to Pansy?”

Harry was silent for a moment, then looked at Hermione with annoyance. “I hate it when you’re right,” he said.

She gave an apologetic shrug. “I suppose you wouldn’t care for some comment to the effect that now you know how Professor Dumbledore must have felt at the time.”

Harry shook his head. “I’ll mention it to her, see what she says. I’m meeting with her later today, so if anything’s decided, I’ll tell you tonight.”

Eight hours later, he told Pansy about the conversation, finishing with, “I just wanted to admit that I considered not even suggesting it, but Hermione was right, it wouldn’t have been fair to you. So, if it can be managed safely, and if you want to, it would be great if you could.”

She smiled. “It’s nice of you, both to ask, and to admit what you almost did. But the answer is I can almost certainly come, and there are no security problems. I’ve long since been able to use the fireplace to go pretty much wherever I want, without having to account for where I go. And fortunately, I’ve never involved Malfoy in my home life. He’s never been to my home, even had his head in my fireplace, nor mine in his. We haven’t had any contact in the summer or during vacations, just at Hogwarts. So that’ll be no problem. If my parents aren’t in the living room, I can just say the name of the Weasleys’ house and go straight there. If they stay in the living room for a long time, I can just go to Diagon Alley or someplace like that, and then go from there to the Weasleys’. Either way, it’ll be fine. And I would be happy to. It would be nice to spend some time with the rest of you. I’ll also be keen to hear about what you do with the Aurors.”

“I’ll be interested to know myself,” he assured her. “Okay, then, the thing to do is to keep in contact with Hermione with the notebooks. It’ll probably be between the day after Christmas and New Year’s Day, so you can let Hermione know if any of those days are bad for you. And I’m glad you can come.”

“So am I,” she agreed. “It’ll be really nice to do something like this. It’s also nice that I’ve met the Weasleys and they know about me. Maybe I can get to know Ron and Neville a bit, too.”

“Oh, that’s right, you already know Ginny from spending time with her after Hogsmeade, right?”

“And talking to her with the notebooks,” Pansy said. To Harry’s surprised look, she said, “You didn’t know about that? After Hogsmeade, Ginny asked Hermione if she could borrow the notebook a couple of times a week so she could talk to me, and we’ve been doing that ever since. We’ve gotten to know each other pretty well.”

“No, I didn’t know that, it’s great,” Harry said enthusiastically. “I’m glad that you’re doing that. Hermione had a really good idea with the notebooks.”

“And you were really good to pay for them,” she said. Harry was startled. “Yes, she told me. It was very nice of you. She told me how much you get for being a teacher, so I didn’t feel too bad. I know you can afford it. But it was still really nice.”

“For me,” he said, “it was nice to be able to use the money I have to do something like that. More than once I’ve wanted to buy Ron something really nice, but I know I shouldn’t, because he can’t reciprocate, and it makes him feel bad. I wish he didn’t feel that way. It’s funny... when I was growing up, I never had any money, because my Muggle relatives never gave me any. In the wizarding world, because of what my parents left me, I’ve always had more than enough. But the thing I’d really like to do—do something nice for the Weasleys—I can’t, because of how they’d feel about it. It’s almost frustrating sometimes. So I was really happy to be able to pay for the notebooks; I felt like the money I had could do some good.”

She chuckled. “I can understand that, but I can’t help but think, first thing, that Malfoy would laugh at that sort of attitude. To him, money is a way to get power. And luxury, but mainly as a tool. You know how his father bought respectability and power after Voldemort’s downfall, so that’s how he looks at it. Given that, it’s both nice and not surprising that you would look at money as a way of being good to people.”

Harry shook his head. “I’ve never understood the appeal of power, not the way Malfoy and people like him see it. Maybe that’s because I’ve always seen power from Professor Dumbledore’s perspective. To him, power is responsibility, and you get it when people give it to you, not from trying to take it. He lost those posts a year and a half ago after Voldemort came back, but he didn’t care. He was doing the right thing, and if people didn’t want to give him responsibility while he was telling the truth about Voldemort coming back, then I think he just knew that that was the way it had to be. I’ve learned that the only kind of power worth having is when people give it to you, and trust you to do the right thing with it even when they disagree with you.”

Pansy thought for a minute. “I guess you’ve had quite an education, spending as much time with him as you have. I had never thought of it like that. I just always assumed that power was something you tried to get so you could control things, make them be the way you wanted them.”

“It seems to me that you have to persuade people of things, not try to make them do things. But I guess if you spend time with Malfoy, you would see it like that.”

“I don’t think it’s just him,” she said. “It seems to work that way with the Ministry too, from what I’ve seen.”

“Maybe you’re right,” he allowed. “They seriously misused their power last year, I know that for sure. Not just what they did to me and Dumbledore in the Prophet, but just denying that Voldemort was back. That certainly put me off power, especially the idea of trying to have it. I can barely handle what I have... though I guess I wouldn’t say that I have ‘power,’ it’s more like ‘influence.’ All I care about is that I can help get people to say Voldemort’s name, get people to fight him.”

“And you have,” she said, her pride obvious. “You got me saying it, and I never thought I could.”

“You just did it because you felt sorry for me,” he said lightly, recalling that she had done it when he was grieving for the Hogsmeade dead.

She looked at him in dismay and a little anger. “Is that what you think?” she asked. He gave her a kind of blank, ‘what did I say?’ look. Looking stern, she continued, “I did it because... when you were crying, what you were going through... I’d never seen anyone in that much pain. I had... I guess it’s called an epiphany, I suddenly realized what you’ve taken on your shoulders. Not only the risk to you and your friends, but the risk that’s indirectly there based on what you do. I could feel your despair, how responsible you felt, and I realized that this was something you risked to get people to say Voldemort’s name, and how important it was to do it, that you would risk both the Cruciatus Curse and the emotional pain of people dying like that. When I saw that, I knew that saying his name was minor compared to that, and I said his name to let you know that I understood that. I was supporting you, not feeling sorry for you.”

Harry looked down for a few seconds. Then he looked up and said, “I’m sorry. That was a stupid thing to say. I took something that was hard for you, and made it sound like it wasn’t important. Sometimes I say things without thinking about them very well, and this was one of them. I guess I just automatically try to minimize it when someone compliments me like you did, acting like it was just you being nice instead of something I did. But I’m really sorry.”

She nodded. “I understand. I suppose I’ve done things like that before. Not to mention years of doing really bad things. I have no business chastising you.”

“C’mon, Pansy, you can’t keep beating yourself up with that. Not only that, but that has nothing to do with this. You have every right to be upset with me if I say something thoughtless, or even if it’s not thoughtless but just upsets you. Your past doesn’t take away your right to have your feelings, or to say what they are.”

She thought for a few seconds. “You reflexively put yourself down by minimizing your accomplishments, and I do it by bringing up my past. At least we have something in common.”

He nodded, recognizing the similarity. “Looks like you’re right. Maybe we can both try to work on it. It won’t surprise you to know that Hermione’s criticized me for

excessive modesty more than once, and so has Professor Dumbledore. And, by the way... when you said his name, that night I woke up, I knew it was support. Even in my grief, I knew, and I appreciated it. I just couldn't say it right then. Couldn't do much of anything right then. But I knew."

"I'm glad, Harry. I'm glad you knew that." They were both silent for a moment. Then Pansy said, "Do you think we should finish it up for today, or was there anything else you wanted to talk about?"

"Actually, there is one thing... I'm curious, do you, or did you ever, collect Chocolate Frog cards?"

She shrugged. "Not really... I looked at them, and I might have kept some of them, but I never really collected them. Why?"

"I figured... I think collecting them is more of a thing that boys do than girls. Hermione never did either, but Ron and Neville did. Anyway, there's one that I thought might interest you." He took a card from under his robes and handed it to her.

She looked at it, and gaped as much as Ron and Neville had. She was speechless. "I suppose I shouldn't say anything that minimizes my accomplishments," he joked. "They asked me last month if they could do it. I didn't want to, but Hermione and Professor Dumbledore persuaded me that it was a good idea. So I asked for some extras. You're welcome to keep that one if you want."

She finally found words. "Harry, this is amazing... not compared to what you've done, of course, but it really says something. You deserve it for everything you've done, of course, but this is a serious kind of recognition. I'm glad they persuaded you to overcome your modesty and agree to it. This is great."

"There was one thing I insisted on. Turn it over and read it." She did, and gaped again. "There was no way I was going to agree to a Harry Potter card that said 'You-Know-Who' on the back of it."

"I see what you mean, it would be kind of silly. Still, this is amazing... of course, I want to keep it, Harry. But I was wondering if you would sign it for me, too."

“Normally I’d be too embarrassed to,” he admitted. “Even without Malfoy’s acting like I love the attention I get, seeing Lockhart in second year made me never want to sign an autograph, ever.” She chuckled, remembering Lockhart’s vanity. “But I sort of understand that it makes people happy, so I’ll deal with it.” She handed him the card and a pen, and he thought for a minute. “Well,” he said with a casual air, “I’m not good at thinking of original things to say, so I’m just going to sign yours like I signed Hermione’s and Ginny’s. It’s easy enough, since it’s true.” He finished signing, and handed the card and the pen back to her.

She looked at it, then looked at him, already near tears, as if seeking confirmation of what he had written. He kept his eyes on hers. She stood up and walked to him; he stood too as she wrapped him in her arms. They held each other gently as tears rolled down her cheeks. “You know, Harry,” she finally said, “this is the first time I’ve ever cried because I was happy. My first thought was that I don’t deserve this, I don’t deserve to have you feel that way about me. But I realized that it’s a thought I shouldn’t have. So my next thought,” she said, now looking into his eyes, “is that I love you, too.” She kissed him on the cheek, then held him again. “Thank you, Harry, thank you so much...” After a minute had passed, she said, “I’m sorry, I can’t seem to let go of you.”

He laughed, gently squeezing her shoulders. “It’s all right, I’ve got my eyes on the map. You can hold on for as long as you want. Seems like I don’t mind.”

She chuckled. “I think I’m holding on because... I feel like I’m holding onto love, kind of. My father has never said he loved me. My mother has, but rarely, and in a kind of perfunctory way. Not like she really meant it, not with emotion. You really mean it, I can tell in your eyes. It’s so wonderful, you’ve made me so happy.” She stepped back a bit, her hands still on his shoulders. “Did Ginny and Hermione react this way when you gave them their cards?”

He smiled. “Not quite... Ginny hugged and kissed me, like you did; Hermione didn’t, I think because we were in the Great Hall. I think she would have. But they didn’t have as strong a reaction as you did, because they had already told me that,

and I had told them. They knew it already. But since I had never told you I loved you before... it's funny, I never could have done this last year. I would have been mortified. It's just because of Professor Dumbledore, helping me access the love I felt, and Hermione..." He told her about the conversation they'd had after talking with John about Dumbledore and the golden dog. "She was the first person who ever told me she loved me. It was... like you said about me a few months ago, like hearing music for the first time. I couldn't believe how good it felt. So I think I know how you feel. Just keep in mind... you do deserve it. I didn't decide to feel this way about you, I just do. So it must be that you deserve it. Also, I want you to know... you're just as important to me as my other friends."

She gave him a final squeeze, and released him. "That means a lot to me, Harry, because I know what they mean to you. Thank you for the card. I'll always treasure it." She paused. "You know what I should also thank you for... you were afraid that I would fall in love with you. Telling me something like this could only encourage that, but you did it anyway, because you wanted me to know. You could easily have avoided it. Thank you for not doing that."

"I'd be lying if I said the thought never popped into my head," he admitted. "But I didn't think about it for very long. It would really be unfair to you to do that. Something like this, it's important. Someone's coming," he interrupted himself, leaning over for a closer look at the map. "Oh, it's Justin, it's okay. I told you he knows about you, right?" She nodded. Justin knocked on the door. "Come in," Harry said

Justin entered, doing a slight double-take upon seeing Pansy. "Hi, Justin," she said. "I'd like you to meet the new, better Pansy Parkinson. And I hope you'll forgive the old one for all the stupid stuff she did."

Justin smiled. "Harry's told me what you're doing, Pansy. I really admire you for it. It must be very difficult." Pansy blushed.

"It is," agreed Harry. "I admire her too." He put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed to emphasize the point. She beamed, and blushed harder as Justin

chuckled. “You’ve really changed since last year, Harry,” he said. “Must be all that love. Guess you need a lot of love to beat Voldemort.”

“He certainly has that,” agreed Pansy, who to Harry’s surprise stepped towards Justin and showed him the card. Justin grinned. To Harry’s expression, she said, “Well, I want to show it to somebody. I’m proud of it.”

“That seems to be common,” Justin said. “Hermione showed me hers, too. Well, she showed both Ernie and I, so we could see the card. You should have seen Ernie’s face. Hermione was like, ‘no, he means a friendship kind of love, don’t get that started again.’ She obviously has a sore spot about those Rita Skeeter articles.” “I don’t blame her,” said Pansy, as Harry nodded.

“Ernie was okay after that. To tell you the truth,” Justin said, lowering his voice, “I think he kind of fancies her. I know they spend time together in the library, and just the way he talks when she comes up... I could be wrong, it’s just a feeling. I know he really respects her intellect. You wouldn’t know if she maybe fancies him, would you?”

Harry shook his head. “Whoever she may fancy, if anyone, she hasn’t mentioned it to me.” He glanced at Pansy, who also shook her head. “If we’re right about them being Head Boy and Girl next year, they’ll have plenty of time to spend together, though.”

“Anyway, Harry,” said Justin, “Hermione said you’d give me a card, but that you were too embarrassed to just come up and offer it. So here I am.”

“It just seems like too much,” he said. “Like...”

“Like something Malfoy would get on you about, I know. She told us why, and I can understand it. I know you hate to be like ‘look at me, I’m Harry Potter,’ especially after those articles last year. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

“Well, they’ll find out after the New Year, anyway, it’ll be all over the school...”

Harry told them what he planned to do with the first years; Justin and Pansy both grinned. “That’s so nice of you, Harry,” she said. “They’ll love it.”

Justin nodded. “My brother’ll go bananas. I can see it already, he’ll run around showing it to everyone, he’ll bother people on the street he doesn’t know and show them. No matter what my parents get for him, that’ll be his favorite gift.”

“Be sure you don’t tell him, or anyone else,” Harry cautioned. “I want it to be a surprise, and if one first year knows...”

“All the others will know within five minutes,” Justin finished. “I understand, I’ll keep it under my hat. Hermione already told us to keep it secret, but she didn’t say why, exactly. You must be proud, Harry. It’s an incredible honor.”

“Honestly, I’ve been too embarrassed to be proud, but I suppose you’re right. You should have seen me when I got the letter telling me about it. I felt a little bit like I felt when I got that scroll.”

Justin laughed. “Oh, yes, that was great. You’ll be hearing about that for as long as you live, I’ll bet. Anyway, I’d like my card signed too, if you don’t mind.”

Pansy took out the pen she’d given him and handed it over. Harry fished another card out of his robes. As he signed it, he told them how he’d threatened Ron about signing his, causing them both to laugh. Harry wrote, ‘Justin– thank you for saving my life,’ then signed it and handed it to Justin, who smiled again as he read it. “It was my pleasure, Harry. Hell, it already made me a hero to my brother. He was so proud of me, it was hard for him not to tell our parents.”

“So, Ernie didn’t want a card?” Harry asked.

“He said he didn’t, but I think he does,” said Justin. “Hermione told us that you were too embarrassed to ask us if we wanted one; I think Ernie’s too embarrassed to come and ask for one. I think if you signed one for him and I brought it to him, he’d be pretty happy.”

Harry nodded. “Well, since I was too embarrassed to offer, I can’t blame him for being too embarrassed to ask. Of course, I’ll be happy to.” He paused. “You know, Justin, I’d like to sign his the same way I signed yours. He saved my life too. I’m just a bit concerned that if I do—“

"It'll remind him about how he felt because he didn't join, I know," Justin agreed. "But I agree, he does deserve it. Look, go ahead and do it anyway. I'll make sure he understands that you're serious, how you mean it. I want him to be able to show it to his kids someday, like I will mine." Harry took out another card and signed it the same way. "Thanks," said Justin. "I'm sure that when they come out, my brother will be buying more. He's going to want extras, he collects them anyway."

"Well, he'd better do it soon, then," Harry said. "The Chocolate Frog people told me in the letter that they're going to have a special promotion for it. Just for the month of January, one in every twenty Chocolate Frogs will contain my card. After that, it goes back to the usual chances, which I guess is one in a few hundred or something. So he should get them soon if he's going to."

"I have a feeling he's going to be in Diagon Alley the first day they're out, with all the Galleons he can get his hands on. And I bet he won't be the only one, either. It should be interesting to see what happens."

"One thing I know will happen," said Pansy, "is that the first day back after vacation, in your class, your first years will be so busy thanking you that it'll be hard to teach. Then, the next day, the second years will ask why they didn't get them." Harry couldn't help but nod at the truth of it. "I thought of that, but I couldn't reasonably ask for three hundred cards. I guess I'll just tell them the truth, that I thought the first years would appreciate it more. If they get the card, I'll sign it for them, is the best I can do." He paused. "You know, it's funny... four months ago, I was really scared of being a teacher, I was just hoping I wouldn't do too badly. It still amazes me that I'm thought of the way I am."

"Well, it amazes us that you did something spectacular, Harry. You should try to enjoy it once in a while. You deserve it."

"Thanks, Justin. I manage to occasionally."

"Harry, I should go," said Pansy. She looked at the map. "We were finished anyway, and of course we can't leave at the same time. I'll go now, and you and Justin can leave in a few minutes."

“Okay. Hermione’ll let you know when to come. I hope you can, I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me too,” she said eagerly. She put the card in a pocket in her robes. “Thank you so much, Harry. See you, Justin.” She gave them a wave and walked out into the classroom.

After a few seconds’ silence, Justin said, “Now, that is one happy girl.”

Harry nodded, happy that he’d made her so happy. “It’s amazing how close we’ve gotten in such a short time.” He explained briefly that they met once or twice a week, and why. “So, she basically has no one to talk to,” he concluded. “That’s why she’s so happy to see me.”

Justin grinned, and Harry knew why he was before he said anything. “Something tells me that’s not the only reason,” he said wryly. “So, you and she aren’t...”

Harry shook his head. “Nope. Scroll or no scroll, I’m still too chicken.”

“I bet there’s some people who’d argue with that,” countered Justin, “but just for the sake of discussion, suppose there was no danger...” He looked at Harry questioningly.

Harry’s impulse was to avoid the question, but then he remembered that Justin had saved his life, so he supposed Justin should be able to ask that kind of question if he wanted to. Harry thought for a few seconds. “Honestly, I’m not sure. I like her a lot, but I really try not to think about that. I feel like I’d just be torturing myself, thinking about something I can’t have, and I don’t see the point. I see her like I see Ginny and Hermione, that’s all I can really say.” He saw Justin looking at him with sympathy, like Hugo had when he’d asked Harry the question in September.

Justin nodded. “I guess I can see why you feel that way.” He paused. “Funny, you have a phoenix, a Chocolate Frog card, good friends, and the first years love you... but I’m still not sure I’d want to be you.”

“I’m not sure either, Justin,” he answered, half-seriously. “Guess I’m stuck with it.”

The next morning, Harry woke up at 7:30, a bit later than usual, but well in time to be ready to leave at 9:00, the time suggested by Cassandra in her last letter. He said goodbye to Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville, and met Professor McGonagall at the entrance to the castle. He carried his trunk, again bewitched to weigh almost nothing, behind him. They walked together to the Hogwarts gates and out into Hogsmeade.

Harry sighed as they walked down the main street in Hogsmeade toward the Owl Post Office. Responding to McGonagall's inquiring look, he said, "I was just thinking, I doubt I'll ever be able to look at this place in the same way I used to." She regarded him sympathetically. "Such associations do fade, but they never leave us entirely," she agreed. "There are several sites in London which I will always associate with attacks perpetrated by Voldemort about sixteen years ago in which I lost friends, friends with whom I was as close as you are with yours."

He nodded somberly. "I can really understand that," he said. "I'm sure I'll always feel that way about the Department of Mysteries, not that I'll have that much reason to go there in the future. Probably just as well, I might end up walking through that veil."

"Which is one of the reasons that room is so inaccessible," she said. "Like Hogwarts, it does not permit Apparation or Disapparation. The closest to it that one can Apparate is the Atrium near the entrance. Which, I suppose, has its own associations for you as well." To his great surprise, she took his hand for a few seconds, squeezed it, then released it. He looked at her with an expression of appreciation, but said nothing.

"Harry... you don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but... why did you show us that fourth dream as you did? You could have arranged with Professor Dumbledore for it to be edited. It was so highly personal, I felt as though I were intruding."

He shrugged. "I didn't really think about it. With what was going on, I was totally focused on getting Voldemort out of my dreams, and I thought any little clue could

be important. All of my friends already knew what had happened, so it wasn't an issue with them. The only one I thought twice about was Professor Snape, and if his attitude towards me hadn't changed this year, I might have seriously considered it. But now... I guess I thought of it like taking off your clothes when you go to the doctor. He was there because it was important that he be there. As for you... I don't know, I just didn't mind. You know how I feel about you, Professor." He almost held back saying the last sentence, but decided to anyway; her support during the Voldemort trial had meant a lot to him, and he had come to understand that her true personality was rather different than the one she showed students.

She raised an eyebrow, as if in great doubt. "In that case, why is it that I did not get a card?" She smiled a little as Harry burst out laughing. More seriously, she said, "Yes, I do know, Harry. And thank you."

"It never occurred to me that you'd want one," he said, though he knew she had almost certainly been joking. "And it isn't just me that feels that way. Especially Hermione."

"I have always considered her something of a kindred spirit," McGonagall said. "I confess to having raised my hand more than my share of times as a student. And I was Head Girl, as she no doubt will be. I find myself hoping that she will apply for a position on the teaching staff in the future, when one comes up."

Harry was a little surprised. "What subject?"

She gave him a knowing look. "Can you think of a subject she would not be qualified to teach?"

"Good point," he agreed. "No, wait a minute, there's Divination."

She didn't quite roll her eyes, but seemed to almost do it. "Yes, and I would say that speaks well of Hermione." Harry grinned. "Nothing personal about Sybil Trelawney, who I'm sure is a lovely person once you get to know her, but I admit I have always considered Professor Dumbledore's decision to continue the subject of Divination to be similar to his allowing Peeves the run of the castle."

Harry laughed and shook his head. “Boy, was that subject a complete waste of time. I would’ve taken Muggle Studies if I’d known, or if I’d known John. It didn’t take Ron and I long to just start making stuff up. The more violent and awful we made it, the better she liked it. And she loved to predict my death. She must have done it a few dozen times in three years.”

“Unfortunately, on quite a few occasions, she has been nearly right. But for your friends...”

If she had planned to finish the thought, she never got a chance, as they were met by a taller-than-average, slightly plump witch with medium-length dark hair. Harry couldn’t guess her age, but he felt as though she was the same age his parents would be if they were still alive. She smiled at McGonagall. “Professor, it’s nice to see you again. You look very well.” Turning to Harry, she said to McGonagall, “And who is your handsome young companion?”

Harry and McGonagall both laughed. “Sometimes I wish,” he said, “that someone could ask me that and really need to be told.”

“Fame probably seems a lot more appealing if you’re not already famous,”

Cassandra agreed. “But I’m afraid there’s no chance of that happening to you, Harry. Especially now, with these floating around.” She reached into her robes and pulled out a Harry Potter Chocolate Frog card.

McGonagall reached out to take it as Harry raised his eyebrows. “How did you get that? I only got them yesterday.”

Her answer was cut off by McGonagall’s exclamation of surprise on reading the back of the card. “Harry, did they offer to do this, or did you demand it?”

“The latter,” he said. “Anything else would have looked stupid.”

“A good use of your fame, to advance your cause,” agreed Cassandra. “But to answer your question, Aurors have lots of connections. Fortunately, being an Auror is a very honored position, and people are often happy to do things for us. Many of us were interested, Tonks in particular.”

Harry smiled, and quickly explained to McGonagall how Tonks had been acting. “She’s been having fun with me ever since the article.”

“I don’t know, Harry,” said Cassandra, a little more serious now. “I’m sure she is to an extent, but I think at the same time she is a bit smitten with you. She knows you’re too young, but I think she is anyway. I mean, what you said in that article, you were practically waving a red flag in the face of any girl in your age range.”

Harry shook his head. “See, this is how little I know about women. I thought it would discourage them.”

Cassandra’s face took on a motherly look. “That you know little about women was also shown by the fact that you said it in the first place. It was so obviously wrong, which the girls at Hogwarts told you in that scroll. Nobody who had ever been in love, Harry, would have said what you said. But I know that you’re trying to avoid the pain and the worry, and it’s understandable. We all feel for you.”

Harry sighed. “One of these days, I’ll forgive Hugo for asking that question. You must be right, since everyone has said the same thing. But there’s not much I can say until it happens.”

“Well, I should let you take him back,” said McGonagall. “Cassandra, it was good to see you again. Harry, have a good vacation.” She nodded goodbye, then turned to walk back down the street toward Hogwarts.

Cassandra took his arm lightly and steered him towards the Owl Post Office.

“Harry, I’m sorry. Here I just met you, and I’m taking liberties like that. I know that can’t be an easy topic for you.”

Harry waved off her apology. “Really, it’s all right. I feel like I know you already, from your letters. I know you’re trying to help. Also, Neville speaks highly of you.”

“I’m glad. Neville’s a very nice boy. What happened to his parents was a terrible wound to the Auror community. They were young, very well liked, very good people. I assume he’s told you that I was good friends with Alice?” Harry nodded. “You and he have a lot in common, Harry. Both lost your parents very young, born at the same time.”

You'd really think so if you knew the prophecy, thought Harry. He said, "I think he got the worst of it. At least with my parents, it was fast. I can't imagine the number of times he must have thought about how it was for them. I've sometimes wondered if that was why he was so shy."

"It could be," she said, "but I kind of think shyness is something you're born with. But I noticed you used the past tense. He did seem different the last time I was there, and his grandmother mentioned it as well. She said she thought being in your group had something to do with it." She paused, her face turning grim as they walked into the room with the fireplace in the Owl Post Office. "She also said that Lestrage tortured him in the Department of Mysteries."

"He ran into a room, with a broken nose and bleeding, where ten Death Eaters had me cornered," Harry confirmed. "I saw her do it. She's just... evil. Unbalanced and evil."

"I've never killed, Harry," she said quietly as they stopped in front of the fireplace. "There were times when I could have, and I would have been excused, but I never did. But I think I could kill her if she were standing in front of me... I suppose you can understand that. You showed us those dream encounters with Voldemort, even that one where he taunted you with your memories. I think you might have killed her if you knew how, if you could have. Nobody would have blamed you."

"I'm just as glad I didn't know how. I really don't want to do that. But I can really see how you feel. She certainly deserves whatever she gets."

Neither said anything for a moment. Then she said, "Well, enough of this cheery talk, Harry. Let's get a move on. We've had you authorized, of course, so don't worry. Just say 'Auror Training Center.'"

He did so as he threw some powder into the fire, and stepped in. In a second, he was in a large living room, nicely decorated and with a number of chairs and a few large sofas. He took a step out and saw six people get up to greet him.

Kingsley Shacklebolt reached him first, and shook his hand warmly. “Harry, good to see you again,” he said as Cassandra appeared in the fireplace behind him. “We’re glad you could come.”

“I’m glad you’ll have me. I’ve been looking forward to spending time with all of you.” He suddenly decided to take Hermione’s advice as he saw Tonks approach. “Especially Tonks,” he added, as he smiled at her.

All the Aurors in the room laughed, as Harry realized that everyone must know about her attitude towards him. “That’s it, Harry, get into the spirit of the thing,” chuckled Kingsley.

Tonks looked at Harry suspiciously. Then she smiled, and walked up to him and kissed him on the cheek. She looked a bit surprised when he showed no signs of embarrassment. “So, what made you take this attitude?” she asked.

“I’ll admit I was a bit concerned,” he said, smiling. “But Hermione told me to just enjoy it. I figure if I can keep focused on love near Voldemort, I can deal with you having a bit of fun with me.”

“If you can keep focused on love near Voldemort, Harry, most of us would assume you can do just about anything,” said a wiry wizard with light brown hair, about Harry’s height. “We haven’t met, I wasn’t around for your presentation in September. Jack Temble, nice to meet you.”

“You too,” said Harry, shaking his hand.

The others approached him. “Steve Janus, we met in September, but just briefly; with all those people, I wouldn’t expect you to remember.” Steve was a little tall with short black hair, a cleft chin, and a friendly expression. Two others, named Joan Wilson and Winston Clark, introduced themselves as well. Harry vaguely recalled the faces from September, but not the names. To Clark, he said, “It’s funny, I have a first year with the last name of Clark. I wouldn’t assume you’re related, though, since Clark is a common name.”

“You mean Helen? No, she’s my daughter,” said Clark, surprising Harry. “Actually, Clark isn’t a common name in the wizarding world. My father was Muggle-born.

But yes, you've been an important topic in many of the owls she's sent. She told my wife and I all about what happened. We were proud of her, and of you for what you taught her and the other first years."

"I was really proud of her," Harry said sincerely. "She was really brave. She'd just gotten to the place, knew little about it, but helped organize resistance to the neighborhood bully. She also understood, faster than the others, why I had to take on Voldemort, no matter what."

"She learned what you taught her, Harry, first with words and then by your example. Not to take anything away from her; you're right, she was very brave. But she couldn't have done it without you. I'll admit that I was wondering what Dumbledore was doing, making a sixteen-year-old the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. But after the first week of owls, I wondered no more. And after the Voldemort thing, I wondered why you weren't made Minister of Magic by acclamation." The others laughed as Harry smiled in embarrassment.

"See, isn't he cute?" said Tonks. "He's been praised and complimented who knows how many times, and he still gets embarrassed so easily."

He looked at her in playful annoyance, but answered Clark. "I wondered what he was doing at first, too. I was stunned. I really didn't want to do it, I was afraid I'd fail. But you probably know, it's very difficult to say no to Professor Dumbledore." Kingsley nodded. "The man's done so much, he has such great moral authority. But you know, Harry, and not to embarrass you more, but you now have quite a bit of moral authority as well. What you were willing to endure to say his name was a more difficult trial than any of us will ever have to face, almost certainly. What you did means that when you speak, people will pay attention and respect it. Your crusade might have created a huge backlash, normally. People would have let their fears run rampant, and criticized you for stirring up Voldemort while sitting there safe at Hogwarts. But when people heard what you did, they either said his name because you inspired them to, or because they were ashamed not to. Either way, it worked."

Harry shook his head in wonder. “And the funny thing is, Voldemort made it worse than it would have been if he’d just left me alone. I guess being as powerful as he is can make you overconfident. I’m sure it never occurred to him that he could lose the fight he started.”

“Why shouldn’t he think that way? He’s Voldemort, after all,” said Tonks. “Except for when he tried to kill you as a baby, he hadn’t lost a fight for a long time. So, naturally, he’s going to be looking for any chance to get you. Which is one of the reasons we wanted you here.”

“Why is that?” he asked, confused. “I thought you wanted me here to work on the spell some more.”

“No, I don’t think anyone actually said that,” said Cassandra. “I mean, I’m sure we’ll ask you some more questions, but that’s not the reason we wanted you here. We want to give you some extra training, teach you some more stuff.”

Kingsley nodded. “Harry, you’re going to be facing him again. It’s bound to happen. We want you to have the best shot you can against him, and the Death Eaters. There are things you need to be able to do.”

“Like what?” Harry asked.

“For one, to Apparate. That’s the first thing we’re going to work on.”

“But I’m—“

”Not seventeen yet, we know,” said Tonks.

“I mentioned before, Harry, that being an Auror is an honored position,” said Cassandra. “We get a pretty substantial amount of license from the Ministry. If we ask for something, and it’s not outrageously expensive or morally questionable, we tend to get it.”

“Unfortunately, Cassandra, these days it’s the politically rather than morally questionable that tends to be a problem. Harry knows, he was harassed politically most of last year,” said Kingsley.

“Well, anyway,” continued Cassandra, “we applied for, and were given, special dispensation for you. You can now legally Apparate, and you will continue to be

able to do so; it's not just for this weekend. Also, the dispensation is not only for Apparation, but for everything to do with your being underage. You could be in a highly dangerous situation anytime, and we don't want you having to stop and think about whether you were justified or not, what trouble you might get in. You deserve it, considering what you've done, and the danger you're in. As of now, for legal purposes, you are of age. You are authorized to do anything an adult wizard can do."

Harry didn't quite know what to say; this was the last thing he had expected.

"Thank you," he said. "I really appreciate that you've done this."

She shook her head dismissively. "Like I said, you absolutely deserve it. Also, we need you, and the ability to Disapparate could save your life. We feel it's serious."

"But not too serious for a little wagering," grinned Tonks.

To Harry's questioning look, Temble said, "Many of us like to bet on things, probably more than most people do. We think it's a result of high-stress jobs. We often bet on things that are hard to predict, but not totally random. A few people decided to start a betting pool on how long it'll take you to learn to Apparate for the first time. Ten of us, ten Galleons each, so whoever's closest gets a hundred Galleons."

Harry couldn't help but find this amusing. "So, who picked the fastest time?"

"We don't know," said Cassandra. "We only know what we picked, we don't get to find out what everyone picked until the event in question happens. Just so you know that if someone seems especially keen for you to get it in the next few minutes, it means that the time they picked is almost there."

"What's the average time it takes a person to do it for the first time?"

"About two hours," she said. "I think it's safe to say that we all picked some time under that."

"No pressure, though," added Tonks, with a mischievous grin.

"Okay, well, I'm ready to start anytime. I've really been looking forward to learning this."

“Hmmm... what time is it... nineteen after nine, okay,” muttered Kingsley. “The interesting thing about Apparation, Harry, is that there really isn’t that much to learn. It’s just a matter of trying until you get it right, as is the case with a lot of spells. When you’re trying to work it out in the beginning, the key is visualization. Imagine yourself in the place you want to end up, and simply will it to happen. Your success will be determined by the strength of your visualization.

“Let’s give it a first try. I want you to try to Apparate to the other side of this room. See that painting over there on the opposite wall? Try to Apparate so that you’ll be standing in front of that painting. Focus on that spot. Imagine you’re already there. Just decide to be there, and know that you will. We’ll be quiet, and just do it when you’re ready.”

Harry felt that he could do this. He had, after all, unintentionally Disapparated once even before he knew he was a wizard, so he knew he had the ability. Even though it wasn’t a part of Kingsley’s instructions, Harry found himself focusing on love. He realized he had just gotten into the habit of doing that whenever he needed to focus, to concentrate. He thought of Hermione, of Pansy. He felt relaxed, and wanted to take a look at the painting. He decided he was there already..

...and suddenly he was standing a few feet in front of it. He turned in surprise. Six of the Aurors looked surprised as well, as Tonks shouted, “Harry! Yes!” and grinned broadly.

“I take it you said he would do it on his first try,” said Cassandra with amusement, as Temble picked up a sealed envelope and opened it, looking through pieces of paper.

“Hmmm... Nope, the other guesses ranged from four minutes to a little over an hour, but Tonks was the only one who said he’d do it on the first try. Quite a longshot there, Tonks,” said Temble.

Just for fun, Harry Apparated back to where he had been standing before; all of a sudden, it wasn’t that difficult. He was sure he could do it anywhere. “How often do people do it on the first try?”

“Does anyone know of anyone who has?” asked Kingsley. Everyone shook their head. “The people at the Apparation Test Center would know better than us, but we’re sure it’s really rare. Tonks did go out on quite a limb there; I’d say she deserves the Galleons.”

Cassandra looked annoyed. “I was the one who picked four minutes, I thought nobody would go lower than that. Oh, well.”

“That was very impressive, Harry,” said Kingsley. “I’m just wondering, if you had to guess, why would you say that you were able to do that, considering that it’s very rare to do it on the first try?”

Harry thought for a minute. “Well, you said it’s all about visualization, and visualization has a lot to do with focus. Since my life and sanity have depended on being able to focus completely, I’m probably able to do it better than pretty much any other sixteen-year-old. Also, I came up with the shield by visualizing it, so I have experience using that. That’s just a guess, though.”

Kingsley nodded. “I think it’s a very good guess. That’s what I had thought as well. So now, we refine it, make sure you understand how to do it over all kinds of areas. You can Apparate to anyplace on the planet, you don’t have to have been there to do it. If you’ve never been there, of course, it helps to look at maps to get a fix on where you want to go, otherwise you could end up pretty far from it. It’s impossible to Apparate into a solid object; if you tried, you’d just end up at the closest possible spot to the object.”

“So, if I decided I wanted to Apparate in the Sahara Desert, I could do it? Even if I didn’t know exactly where it was?”

Kingsley shook his head. “You have to at least have a general idea of where it is. So if you know that it’s in Northern Africa, that’s enough. You could end up anywhere in the desert if you’re not any more specific than that about your destination.”

“Sorry, but I have to try this.” Harry focused his intentions, and the next thing he knew, he was standing in a desert. He could see nothing but sand and clear blue sky, not even sand dunes. It was very hot, which didn’t surprise Harry, even though in

England it was almost winter. It occurred to him that nobody would live long where he was. He picked up a small handful of sand, focused his thoughts, and was back in the living room at the Auror Training Center. He held out his hand, but didn't spill the sand onto the floor.

Kingsley looked amused. "Almost everyone goes someplace like that as soon as they know they can. It's quite a novelty at first. I went to Antarctica, which I quickly realized was a bad idea. Wizard robes don't keep you very warm."

"I have a question," said Harry. "Well, probably I'll have a lot of questions, but just for now... can you follow someone who's Disapparated? Is there any way to know where they've gone?"

"Unfortunately, no, Harry. It would make our jobs much easier if we could, that's for sure. But there's just no way to do it. I assume the thrust of your question is, if Aurors' jobs are to capture Dark wizards, can we follow them, track them down." Harry nodded. "No, the best we can do is catch them in an anti-Disapparation field. They always have a slight advantage over us because when we find them, that's the first thing we have to do. It's a little bit like, if we were playing chess, we have the black pieces."

"And even that doesn't always work," added Cassandra. "An anti-Disapparation field can be overcome, if the wizard is powerful enough. It often comes down to who is the stronger wizard. If who we're chasing is stronger than we are, they get away. It's that simple. That's why only the strongest wizards can become Aurors."

"That's also why Voldemort is so hard to catch," said Kingsley. "Even if five or ten of us surrounded him and started firing off spells and anti-Disapparation fields, he could still get away. The only one who would have a chance is Professor Dumbledore, and we don't even know for sure how that would go."

"Getting back to Apparation, some people use longitude and latitude to more closely determine where to go. If you have a head for figures, it's not a bad idea. But most wizards get by fine without it. It seems like you're pretty well in tune with your intuition, so I wouldn't worry about it if I were you."

“Okay, here’s an odd question,” Harry said. “If you were falling, and while falling you Disapparated—“

”Would you still have the downward momentum?” finished Kingsley. “It’s not that odd a question, many people ask it. The answer is yes; you can’t save yourself from a fall by Disapparating. If you Apparated on the ground, you would hit it with the force that you were falling with. Now, if you’re falling, you can always Apparate higher up in the air, buy yourself more time, and you could keep doing it indefinitely if you didn’t need to eat and sleep. In your case, of course, you don’t have to worry since you have Fawkes. He can always catch you.”

“That reminds me, did you hear exactly how Professor Dumbledore saved me after I was Cursed off my broom, on the morning after the second dream?” The Aurors shook their heads, and Harry told them the story. They were impressed, but not surprised. “Well, that’s Dumbledore,” said Kingsley. “It’s possible that a few of us could have managed that, if we had a phoenix, but it would be tough.”

“Oh, that reminds me of another thing,” said Harry. “Last year when Dumbledore saved me in the Atrium—he seems to be doing a lot of that lately—he saved me from a Killing Curse by Voldemort by moving a large object in front of it, to shield me from it. He also moved two other things at the same time. Is that something you Aurors do a lot?”

Kingsley nodded. “There are some of us who are still alive today because we did that; it’s pretty well recognized as the only thing you can do with a Killing Curse if you can’t get out of the way. The problem is, it has to be pretty substantial, it can’t just be a piece of wood. I take it you’d like to be able to do that?”

Harry nodded. “But I also have a question. Why can’t you get out of the way of a Killing Curse by Disapparating instead of using objects to block it?”

“You can, sometimes,” answered Kingsley. “The problem is, you can’t know that your adversary hasn’t already put an anti-Disapparation field around you, and when a Killing Curse is on the way is no time to find out. You only have time to do one thing, and if you try to Disapparate and fail, you’re dead. If you have an object you

can block it with, that's the thing to do. One thing Aurors are trained to do is in every situation, take a quick mental inventory of what's around, you have to be able to do it almost without thinking. Disapparating is a last, desperate resort.

"Anyway, moving objects is not that difficult, just for one thing. The trick is doing two or three at once. It takes a certain amount of concentration. We can work with you on that a bit, if you like. I don't think it would take long. It'll help that you can do it silently, with little or no loss of effectiveness. Actually, let's test you on that, we meant to do that at some point." He put a spell on himself, then said, "Hit me with 'Blue.'" Harry did so, and a gold 100 popped up next to Kingsley, who whistled and shook his head. "A sixteen-year-old with a 100... never thought I'd see that. So, yes, that's a big help, you don't have to say anything. We have an area with various random objects, we can have you practice moving them around, in different combinations."

They spent the morning doing a few more Apparation exercises and having Harry move multiple objects around. It was difficult at first, but after an hour's effort, he was finally able to set three objects along three separate preset paths. Then they practiced sending harmless spells at Harry to test his ability to block them with objects. He tended to miss them at first, but again, became better quickly with more practice. "There may not be too many times, though, when you'll need to move three things," said Kingsley. "I know you're thinking of keeping safe whoever you're with. Again, almost the hardest part may be finding things to use."

"Do wizards who are fighting ever use this skill to basically throw things at their opponent?" asked Harry.

"Not really," answered Tonks. "When you're fighting in that way, you have to be dueling. Throwing things is a very inefficient and tactically poor way to go about trying to defeat someone. Also, it's less effort for them to swat it away than it is for you to throw it."

"How do they swat it away?"

“With the Repulsion Charm,” Tonks said. “It’s a kind of a field, really, which extends about a foot from your body. Any object entering it will immediately go back the way it came, with the same force and direction it had coming in. That’s why you have to be careful; if you throw objects, you have to be sure they don’t originate from someplace on a line between you and them, because if they do that, the objects would just hit you. We’ll teach you that one now, it won’t take long.” He practiced for a bit, and sure enough, he was soon causing objects to zoom away from him as fast as they came.

They stopped a little after noon to have some lunch, which was brought by themselves. The conversation turned to Ministry politics and how it affected the Aurors. “We all knew that Voldemort had come back, of course,” Cassandra was saying to Harry. “None of us believed for a second what the Prophet was saying about him, we knew him better than that. One thing about being the Hogwarts headmaster for such a long time is that every single Auror had him for a headmaster, and we knew that in the unlikely event that he was starting to lose his marbles, he’d step down before it became apparent. But the problem was that we couldn’t step forward as one and say that Fudge was full of it and Dumbledore was right. Not so much because we’d all be fired, because they really couldn’t, but because we’d be setting ourselves up as the real authority. We have to be subordinate to the proper leadership, however stupid it may be.”

“But if you had come out and said you believed that Voldemort was back,” asked Harry, “wouldn’t people have believed you and put pressure on the Ministry?”

Cassandra chuckled. “You’re very good at magic, Harry, but I’m afraid you don’t know much about this sort of thing. You think too well of most people. I’m afraid that Fudge was well suited to his position in one way: whether by chance or by design, he told people what they wanted to hear. And history has shown, both for wizards and for Muggles, that politicians who tell people what they want to hear do well.

“Some people would have believed us. But many more wouldn’t have, because it wasn’t what they wanted to hear. It would have created a hugely divisive rift in wizarding society, and made us enemies of the Ministry leadership. Now you may say that’s a price worth paying to get people to recognize that Voldemort was back, and there’s a point to that. But—and Dumbledore will agree with this if you ask him—again, we have to take our orders from the leadership. If we try to take over, even if for the best of reasons, then suddenly we’d be politicians ourselves, having our own internal fights and problems. I’m not saying there was no case for outright rebellion; Voldemort being back was a huge problem. But many of us helped Dumbledore, which was as much as we could do, and as much as he wanted us to do.”

Harry finished a bite of his food. “I guess I understand what you’re saying. But I’m surprised that more people didn’t believe Dumbledore. I mean, a lot of people knew him from Hogwarts, they had to have known what kind of person he is.” She shook her head sadly. “They did, but most were like Fudge—they just didn’t want to believe it, and so found reasons not to. A society is only as good as its citizens, and in this case, our society kept its head stuck in the sand for too long. Dumbledore understood what was going on, of course, but didn’t really have much choice but to do what he did. All he could do was do his best and hope that people would eventually see the truth, and work against Voldemort in the meantime, which he did very well.”

“And now that people are starting to take their heads out of the sand,” continued Kingsley, “here you come along, slapping their faces, telling them that they should say his name, that they should be brave. They know it’s true, but... this may be hard for you to understand, brave as you are, but many people don’t want to be bothered. They’d rather go about their business and keep their heads down. They’ll be stirred to fight if their interests are directly threatened, or if friends or family are harmed, but only then, and often by then it’s too late.”

“I have a hard time believing that,” said Harry. “I mean, look at Hogwarts. I’ve gotten nothing but support there since I started this thing. And this is even after the Prophet spent all year saying what a nutter I was.”

“Well, a few things, Harry,” Cassandra replied. “First of all, people there know you, and they can tell there’s nothing wrong with you. Secondly, most kids don’t read the Prophet, especially not deeply enough to find the little slurs about you. Thirdly, there wasn’t enough time before Voldemort attacked you to find out exactly what support you would have gotten. What if he hadn’t done it? I’m not saying people would have been hostile, but since it happened, I think it’s not so much your campaign people have responded to as much as your bravery. Then they express their support by embracing your campaign. So the Hogwarts community has ample reason to support you. Some Gryffindors could hear you scream, and they told the other students, which is a kind of first-hand account. Dumbledore showed everyone part of your last dream. They could identify with it. Most people haven’t seen it. They’ve heard about it, which is impressive enough. My point is, you’re bound to get more support at Hogwarts.” She paused, then said, “I can only imagine what it would be like if everyone had seen all the dreams, like we have. Winston wasn’t too far off with his ‘Minister of Magic by acclamation’ comment.” Given that no one was objecting to what Cassandra was saying, he assumed that the rest of them felt much as she did. He didn’t want to believe that wizarding society could be so shortsighted. “I can’t argue with you... it’s just frustrating to think that we have such a great person as Professor Dumbledore, and people don’t even listen to him.”

Kingsley nodded. “I can see why you’d feel that way, Harry. You aren’t old enough to have become cynical yet,” he said wryly. “Even our baby has gotten a bit cynical.” “Pretty darn cynical, after what happened last year,” said Tonks. “That was quite an education. If there were any justice at all, Fudge would have been removed from office.”

“Unfortunately, by the time most politicians’ mistakes are made apparent, the damage from them has long since been done,” said Cassandra. To Harry’s surprised look at Kingsley’s comment, she added, “We use the term ‘baby’ to refer to whoever the youngest Auror happens to be at the time, which of course is Tonks right now.”

“But we’re hoping you’ll be our baby soon, Harry,” said Tonks, grinning.

“Thanks,” said Harry, finishing up the last bite of his lunch. “So, what are we doing in the afternoon?”

“Dueling,” said Kingsley. “Dumbledore told us that your class has done the basic bit, but only with ‘Blue,’ of course. We want to teach you how to do it for real. He also said that you did very well in the class tournament, but you weren’t the champion.”

Harry nodded. “In fact, I’m looking forward to doing more with dueling, but I was wondering if we could also have for this the person who beat me. He’s a friend, and I’d really like someone to be able to practice it with at Hogwarts. If he could learn with me, he could keep pace.”

Cassandra shook her head. “I’m sorry, Harry, I can see why you’d want that, but it’s irregular enough having you here. We can’t start bringing people in here; you’re kind of a special case.”

Unhappy, Harry said, “I understand.” He realized that he would have to be happy enough that he got to do this.

“Who beat you?” asked Tonks. “Ron?”

“No, Neville.” Harry noted several surprised looks, but no one was more surprised than Cassandra, who looked incredulous. “Are you serious?”

“Of course,” he said, surprised that she would say that. “Neville’s skills have improved dramatically in the past year, I saw it happen in the D.A. But yes, in the class tournament he barely squeaked by me, but he wiped the floor with everyone else. He beat Malfoy in the sixth-year final, the whole class was cheering him. It was great.” He went on to explain why Neville’s win was especially satisfying after what

Malfoy had said earlier that day about his parents. The Aurors all looked disgusted, but not surprised, that Malfoy would have said such a thing.

Cassandra looked at Harry and said, “Yes, Harry. Neville can join us for the afternoon.” This got a few surprised looks from the other Aurors. “Anyone want to argue with me?” she asked the room.

No one said anything for a moment, then Kingsley said, “No, I think we all know better than that. But we wouldn’t argue anyway, Cassandra, you know that.”

“Good,” she said. “It’ll be a pleasure to help train Neville, Harry. I didn’t mean to be insulting of him by being so surprised. It’s just that his grandmother has always said that he wasn’t that talented.”

Harry remembered what she had said at St. Mungo’s. “I’ve heard her say it too, and I wished she wouldn’t. Things like that probably contributed to his being so shy for such a long time. But it looks now like he had talent all along, but just had a hard time bringing it out. I’m sure it hasn’t helped that we’ve had more than our share of poor Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers at Hogwarts. I have to admit that when we played, I expected to beat him. I was really happy for him, though.”

Cassandra stood up. “Jack, would you do me a favor and go get Neville authorized for our fireplace?” Temble nodded and left the room. “Harry, why don’t you come with me to get him. You can get your first experience... have you ever been to Neville’s house?” Harry shook his head. “So, it’ll be your first time Apparating someplace where you’ve never been. Good practice for you.”

“So, how do I do it? Do I look at a map?”

“Yes, that’s the most common way if you’ve never been to the place before. I’ll go get some maps, and I’ll show you where it is, find the nearest Apparation point.”

She got up and left the room.”

“What did she mean by ‘Apparation point?’” Harry asked the others.

“When wizards live not far from Muggles, as many wizards do,” explained Kingsley, “it’s obviously not a good idea to Apparate anyplace on the street. One could be seen, and we prefer to avoid doing Memory Charms if we can. So, many places

have pre-selected points onto which it's recommended for wizards to Apparate if they're going to that area. That's what Cassandra will be looking for."

"Not to mention they'd hear the sound," Harry agreed. "Speaking of that, I forgot to ask earlier... when anyone's ever Apparated or Disapparated around me, I've heard a popping sound. But I didn't hear it when I did it. Why is that?"

"No one really knows," answered Tonks. "We assume it's for a similar reason that your voice sounds different to you in a recording than it does in your head."

"Okay," said Cassandra, walking back into the dining area. She moved aside some dishes and laid out maps in front of Harry. "Here's a map of England, we're here, and here's the village Neville lives in. Now," she put a different map on top of the others, "Here's a closer map of Neville's area. There's a field a few doors down from his house, and this area has some trees. We'll Apparate here and then walk, it'll only take a few minutes. I assume you're ready to go anytime?"

Harry stood up. "Ready when you are."

"Okay, I'll go first. When you're thinking about where to go, visualizing it, you should also visualize me in that place. It may help you get closer to where I'll be. If you get there and you don't see me anywhere, just come back here and we'll try again. But I have a feeling you'll find me. Are you ready?"

He looked at the maps again, visualizing. "Okay. Go ahead."

With a pop, she was gone. Harry visualized the area, with particular attention to ending up as close to her as possible. He willed himself there.

He was suddenly standing near some trees, and near her—rather nearer than he had intended. His face was about four inches from hers. Just as this was registering, she gave a start. "Harry!" she gasped, putting her hands on his shoulders and taking a step back. "Oh, you startled me! Can't fault your aim, though," she said, recovering. "That was pretty impressive, really. I just didn't expect it."

"Sorry," he said as they started walking. "You can tell I'm still new at this. I focused on standing as close to you as I could, I forgot to think that I might get closer than I should. I didn't think I'd get nearly that close." He chuckled; she looked at him

inquiringly. “I was just thinking, if it was Tonks, she would have said I did it deliberately.”

Cassandra laughed. “Yes, she would’ve. So, what she’s doing doesn’t bother you?”
“Well, at first I was a little nervous. I’m not used to people acting like that with me. But I like Tonks, and I’m flattered that she does it. So I’m trying to, like Kingsley said, get into the spirit of it. Probably if she stopped now, I’d be disappointed.”
She laughed again. “Yes, I can see how you could get used to that. I have a feeling she won’t be the only one, Harry. She’s just doing it a bit more obviously, for humorous effect. But I have a feeling that if you were the same age, it wouldn’t be quite so obvious or quite so humorous.”

“Hermione said the same thing,” he said. “I’ve never really had a girlfriend, so I don’t know how I’d react. But she’s a nice person, and she’s attractive. I’m surprised she’s not taken already, come to think of it.”

Cassandra’s expression became more serious. “You’ll find, Harry, that a higher proportion of Aurors are single than is usual. Our lifestyle makes dating kind of difficult. Also, it’s hard to be married to an Auror. I’m married, but I’m unusual. My husband isn’t the worrying type, but now that Voldemort is back, even he’s a little worried. We have to be ready to pop off at a second’s notice, into highly dangerous situations. It would be unnatural for someone’s partner not to worry.”

“Do you have kids?” Harry asked, curious.

“No,” she said, in a way that made him wonder if she had wanted to. “Not as a choice, it just never happened. It wasn’t something we desperately wanted, so that was all right. But even fewer Aurors have children, especially women. Female Aurors who have babies usually take a year off to take care of the baby, and it makes being an Auror in general a lot harder. When Frank and Alice had Neville, that was unusual. They went to school together, and fell in love while training to be Aurors. We were wondering how they were going to handle raising a son, with the demands on their time. We assume that his grandmother would have had a

significant role anyway. Ah, here we are,” she said, walking up to a small but nice-looking house. She rang the doorbell.

After a few seconds, Neville’s grandmother opened the door. She was clearly surprised by who she saw. “Cassandra, Professor Potter, please come in,” she said politely. “Neville had said that you would be with the Aurors, Professor. What brings you here?”

Neville walked into the room. “Harry! Cassandra!” he said. Cassandra walked over to Neville and hugged him. “Hello, Neville,” she said. Harry got the impression that this was a standard greeting, and he wondered if she thought of Neville in a motherly way. She let go of Neville, who looked at Harry with curiosity. “What are the two of you doing here? I thought they were going to be working with you on that spell.”

“Well, Neville, it turns out that they wanted to train me in Auror stuff instead.”

Neville’s eyebrows shot up. “Yeah, I know, I’m pretty happy about it,” Harry agreed. “Anyway, this afternoon they wanted to teach me dueling, real dueling. I asked them if you could join us, so you could learn along with me, and I’d have a sparring partner I could practice with in Gryffindor Tower. I hope you can come with us for the afternoon.”

Neville’s eyes went wide. “Are you serious? I’d love to! I’m just... really surprised. I... I would have thought you’d have asked for Ron to join you,” he said, embarrassed. “We would have said no to Ron, Neville,” said Cassandra. “That’s who I thought he was going to ask for, too. But he didn’t; he asked for you. Obviously, I wasn’t going to say no.”

“Well, I did have plans for Neville and myself for this afternoon,” said Mrs.

Longbottom, “but I suspect that Neville would never forgive me if I did not change them. We can do them some other day. You both are doing him a great honor.”

“It’s nothing he doesn’t deserve, Mrs. Longbottom,” Harry protested. “Didn’t he tell you that he beat me, and was the sixth-year dueling champion?”

This was the first time Harry had ever seen Neville's grandmother look surprised. "Neville? Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"I was going to, Gran," said Neville. "But you know how I am about sending owls, and I just hadn't gotten a chance to say it in person yet. Vacation just started, after all."

"I expect a full account of it when you return," she said, her pride in his accomplishment understated but clear. "Both that tournament, I mean, and today's activities."

Neville nodded and smiled, clearly very excited. "I promise, Gran. Thank you, both of you," he said to Harry and Cassandra.

"Like I said, Neville, you deserve it," said Harry emphatically. "You're good, and I'll be able to get better practicing against you." Neville looked even more pleased.

"Would you like to use the fireplace?" asked Mrs. Longbottom.

"Yes, thank you," said Cassandra.

"Wait a minute, Harry. How did you get here?" asked Neville.

"That was what we did this morning, Neville." He explained, and enjoyed watching Neville's expression. "So, yeah, I was pretty excited about that."

"I sure would be, too," Neville agreed. "But it's a good idea, after Hogsmeade especially. You could be targeted again, and being able to get away could save your life." Then he looked dismayed. "Of course, you'd never leave if anyone else around was in danger. So maybe it's not that useful."

"Professor Potter," said Mrs. Longbottom sternly. "Neville nearly died helping to save you. Do not misunderstand; I am as proud of his action as I can be. I know his parents are proud. But I will be most displeased if what Neville almost died to protect is wasted carelessly. You must take great care to stay alive. Do you understand me?"

Harry felt as though he were talking to an even stricter version of Professor McGonagall. "Yes, ma'am," he said solemnly. He could see Neville grinning, out of his grandmother's field of vision.

“Very well. Have a pleasant day, all of you.” She gestured them to the fireplace. They went through, one by one, Harry last. He stepped out of the fireplace at the Auror Training Center to see Neville looking around, slightly awed by his surroundings. Not what was in the place, Harry realized, but just the place itself. Cassandra called out, “We’re back!” The other six Aurors walked into the room; in turn, they introduced themselves to Neville and greeted him warmly. Neville, still a bit awed, shook their hands but said little. After a few minutes of small talk, Kingsley said, “Okay, well, let’s get down to it. Neville, Harry, follow me, please.” They followed him into a large, mostly empty room that was obviously for training. “First, let me watch you two have a few bouts with each other using Blue, so I can take a look at your technique, see if anything needs to be fixed.” Neville and Harry squared off and fought twice, each taking one bout, each one again lasting more than a minute. “Very good,” said Kingsley. “You two are quite evenly matched. Neville, would you hit me with Blue, silently, please?” Neville did, and a gold 86 popped up next to Kingsley. Harry and Neville both raised their eyebrows. “It was 79 a few months ago,” said Neville.

“Quite an improvement in such a short time. But then, you have Dumbledore teaching you, so I shouldn’t be surprised,” said Kingsley. “Even so, you’re operating at a disadvantage relative to Harry. Very impressive.” Neville smiled proudly. “Okay, we’re going to start with some of the more basic techniques and spell combinations, and work our way up to the more advanced ones. I don’t mean to say that you two will be able to take on Death Eaters by the time we’re finished today, but I want to give you as much new information as I can. Then, you can practice at Hogwarts, and get better at what you’ll learn today.”

Kingsley spent the next few hours gradually moving them through the basics and the intermediate techniques and skills. Harry felt it was a bit like chess; now they were being taught how the pieces moved, the proper role of each piece, and general strategy. By the end of the day, they would know as much as reasonably possible, and it just remained to practice. It felt like an unusually difficult but interesting class,

requiring great concentration. Occasionally they dueled so Kingsley could check on how they were applying what they were learning. Sometimes Kingsley would have a bout with either of them, defeat them by using a particular technique, then teach it to them and teach them how to defend against it. Then they practiced it.

At 5:00, Kingsley suggested they call it a day, but both Harry and Neville pleaded for more time. Kingsley agreed to go for one more hour. At the end of the hour, tired and hungry but still exhilarated, Harry and Neville reluctantly stopped. They talked with Kingsley for a little while about strategic aspects of dueling, then went with him to the dining area when dinner was served. They sat down at the table with the rest of the Aurors who had been there earlier.

“So, how’d they do?” asked Cassandra, who Harry knew was much more interested in Neville’s progress than his.

“Very well,” replied Kingsley. “Coming along nicely, especially for having as little experience as they do. Still too early to tell, but I see no reason why either couldn’t become expert, with enough practice.” Harry and Neville exchanged a grin.

“That’s great, really great,” she said. “Neville, your grandmother had never said anything about your having this kind of skill. Did this happen recently?”

Neville glanced at Harry, then nodded. “It was because of being in the D.A., Harry’s study group.”

“But Neville, whatever talent you have is nothing I created, or had anything to do with. All the D.A. did was give you a chance to practice,” protested Harry.

Neville shook his head. “It was much more than that, Harry. I think what was stopping me before was psychological. I was always terrified of teachers, feeling that I wouldn’t measure up, or get thrown out for not being magical enough. My gran worried that I wouldn’t get into Hogwarts in the first place. Anyway, people like Snape didn’t help me any.”

“Snape was always awful to Neville,” Harry explained to the group. “Neville was his favorite target besides me.”

Neville shuddered. “That class was a nightmare, I’m so happy to be rid of it. But anyway, I was always really afraid of teachers, except Professor Sprout. I liked her, and I liked Herbology. But the others... it was just hard to get past. But the D.A... Harry had more to do with my skill coming out than he realizes, or will admit,” said Neville, glancing at Harry as he said the last part. “Harry was being a teacher in that group, and a good one. He didn’t criticize, didn’t act like something wasn’t good enough. I started to realize I could... I don’t know, get into it, I guess, without worrying. And once that happened, it just felt as if I wanted to make up for lost time. I looked forward to that time every week.”

“Thank you for that, Neville,” said Harry. “I’m really glad. I looked forward to it too. There was far too little to look forward to last year. But, yes,” Harry said to the group, “at some point, Neville just... blossomed is the only word I can think of. He tried really, really hard, and became one of the strongest members of the group. It was pretty amazing to watch. And satisfying, too.” As was the case earlier in the year, Harry didn’t want to suggest what he suspected, that the escape of Bellatrix Lestrange and other Death Eaters from Azkaban had motivated Neville greatly. Neville said nothing about it, so Harry didn’t either. Harry wondered if Neville just didn’t want to acknowledge it, or was so appreciative of Harry’s efforts that he wanted to give Harry more credit than he should.

“I’ll bet,” said Tonks. “So, Neville, have you ever considered becoming an Auror?”

“No,” Neville said. “I never for a minute thought I would be good enough.”

“From what I saw today, it’s far from impossible,” said Kingsley. “If you think it’s something you’d like to do, you should think about it, find out more about it.”

“But he couldn’t, could he?” asked Harry. “I was told that you had to have a N.E.W.T. in Potions, and he’s stopped taking Potions.”

“That can be gotten around,” said Tonks. “Potions is the least important of what’s supposed to be necessary.”

Harry looked very dismayed. “I thought I had to have Potions to even have a chance of becoming an Auror, it was what Professor McGonagall told me on Career Day last year. I’d hate to think I’m taking N.E.W.T. Potions for nothing.” “Well, technically, she’s right,” explained Cassandra. “On paper. Tonks just means that some people have become Aurors without it, if they were exceptional in other ways and did outside study in Potions to get up to speed.”

“Especially these days,” remarked a clearly annoyed Kingsley. “There have been fewer new Aurors than usual over the past ten years, and we’re pretty sure that Snape is part of the reason. Not him personally, though maybe partly, but the fact that no one can take the N.E.W.T. course unless they got an Outstanding O.W.L. Some people who might have become Aurors otherwise probably looked at the requirements, decided they couldn’t fill them because they couldn’t get into the Potions course, and didn’t investigate being an Auror further. A few years back I asked Dumbledore to persuade Snape to change the requirements, but Snape wouldn’t. Recently, we’ve been seriously considering pushing the Ministry to change the paper requirements to a Potions O.W.L. instead of a N.E.W.T., and doing extra Potions training ourselves. If this continues, it could really become a problem.” Harry nodded, surprised. “I think Neville could do fine with Potions provided that Severus Snape was nowhere in the area.” Neville grunted in agreement.

“I can understand that,” said Tonks sympathetically. “I had him for Potions when I was there. It would be hard to imagine someone more unpleasant. What’s wrong with him, anyway? Cassandra, you were at Hogwarts around the same time as him, weren’t you? Did you know him?”

“I was two years older than him,” answered Cassandra. “He was well known for being interested in the Dark Arts, and for being an adversary of some same-year Gryffindor students, mainly Harry’s father and Sirius Black. I haven’t dealt with him recently, so I can’t say if he’s like how he was then. But he wasn’t exactly a fun person then, either. Just seemed like someone mired in darkness. From what you say, it sounds like he still is. Yet Dumbledore trusts him. I’d love to know why.”

“I’ve asked him,” said Harry. “He won’t tell me, says it’s a private matter between him and Snape. What I’d like to know is why he puts up with Snape being so horrible to the students. I mean, me I can understand; I’m the son of his worst enemy, world-famous in a way I didn’t do anything to deserve. But why Neville? Because he wasn’t good at Potions, or was afraid of teachers? It’s hard to understand.”

Kingsley nodded. “There’s a lot of things in this world that we don’t understand all that well, and that we never will. This is definitely one of them. Something happened between Snape and Dumbledore that we’ll never know.”

There was silence for a minute. Then Harry said, “Can I ask you something... you said earlier that even if five or ten of you surrounded Voldemort and threw spells and anti-Disapparation fields at him, he could still get away, because he’s so powerful. So how is he ever going to be defeated, if he’s that powerful?”

He looked at their faces; nobody seemed very happy with the question. “The answer is that we don’t know,” said Kingsley. “We try to come up with things, but we almost have to hope to get lucky. That’s part of why Voldemort’s such a big threat: he’s so hard to kill. Frankly, Harry, our biggest hope is you.”

The other Aurors did not seem surprised to hear him say that, so Harry assumed it was a widely held opinion among the Aurors. Neville looked a bit surprised, perhaps wondering whether they knew the same part of the prophecy that he did. Tonks said, “You don’t seem surprised to hear that, Harry. Have other people told you this, or has it occurred to you on your own?”

Harry tried to filter everything he said through the idea of not wanting to mention or refer to the prophecy. “There are too many connections I have to Voldemort not to think of it that way,” he said. “The scar, the telepathic connection, my being a Parselmouth, and then recently, the spell I came up with. Not that I have any idea how I could beat him, mind you. Just that I seem extremely connected. Still, as long as we have Dumbledore, I have to think Voldemort can be beaten. I just wondered what you guys thought about it.”

“We sit around, Harry, and wonder what we can do,” said Cassandra. “Right now, the best we can do is try to do what Neville did, to keep you alive. That’s why you’re here.”

“Excuse me,” said Neville, with trepidation. “Why am I here, then?”

Cassandra met Neville’s eyes. “Partly because Harry asked for you... and partly because... Aurors are very close to each other, Neville. It’s kind of like a big family. Even if some of us don’t like each other that much, we’re still like family. And that makes you sort of an extended family member. I feel an obligation to you, to do what I can to help you. You lost your parents to their jobs. The least we can do is look out for you a bit.” Now she smiled. “And it doesn’t hurt that you’re a very nice person.” As Neville looked down, embarrassed, Cassandra got up and left the table, and the rest continued talking. About fifteen minutes later, she came back in and sat down. “Harry, I should have asked you first, but I have a feeling you won’t mind. Neville, I’ve just been to see your grandmother, and she’s given her permission to have you stay with us until Monday, meaning, as long as Harry will. If you want to, that is.”

Harry grinned and turned to Neville, whose expression suggested that Christmas had come early. “Thank you, Cassandra,” said Neville. “I really appreciate it.”

The conversation turned to Neville’s parents, and those Aurors who knew them shared their recollections with Neville. As they talked, Harry felt a warm glow of contentment; this was a wonderful thing to have happened to Neville, and it wouldn’t have happened if he hadn’t requested it. He knew he would enjoy the next two days.

CHAPTER 17

CHRISTMAS AT THE BURROW

On Monday night at a little after six o'clock, Harry stepped out of the fireplace at the Burrow to see Arthur Weasley sitting in the living room, reading. "Harry, dear," said Molly, walking in from the kitchen, wearing an apron. She hugged and kissed him, and Arthur got up and shook his hand. "Good to see you, Harry. Did you have a good time with the Aurors?"

"Very good, thanks," Harry replied. "They showed me all kinds of stuff, it was great. But I'm happy to be here, now."

"Well, we're thrilled to have you," said Molly enthusiastically. "This is the first Christmas we've had you here, we've been looking forward to it. We've had too few young people in the house these days."

"That reminds me, Mrs. Weasley—"

"Molly, dear, Molly."

Harry nodded. "Molly... I was wondering if you were still upset with Fred and George. I kind of feel bad about it, since I'm the one who gave them the gold for the shop. I mean, I don't regret it, I'd do it again, but since they were able to open the shop because of me, and you were upset at them because of that, I felt bad because—"

To Harry's surprise, she looked at him fondly and touched his lips with her hand so he would stop talking. "It's sweet of you to worry about that, but it's all right. I may not approve of their career choice, but I've resigned myself to it, and at least I know they're happy. Arthur tells me I just got spoiled by the older children all being high achievers, and I suppose he's right. Really, don't worry."

Harry wondered whether she was just saying this to make him feel better, but she seemed genuine enough. Maybe the passage of time had helped her get over it. "I'm glad," he said. "I just didn't want to cause any problems."

"Even if you had, nobody could fault your motives," said Arthur. "What you did was extremely generous. You saved them at least a few years of scrounging and making huge efforts to get the money necessary for a shop, and enabled them to start in a good position. Look at how well they're doing now. They've worked hard, but it wouldn't have been possible without you."

Harry nodded, but said, "Yes, but I have lots of money from my parents. It's not such a big sacrifice to give away a thousand Galleons when you've got much more than that in a Gringotts vault. People act like it was a big deal, but it really wasn't."

"It really was, Harry," said Molly. "Most people wouldn't give away a thousand Galleons like that even if they had a hundred thousand more. And if they did, they'd want something in return, to be owed a favor. Maybe it wasn't a financial sacrifice for you, but it was extremely thoughtful, and that's what's important."

It wasn't that thoughtful because I was desperate to get rid of the money, Harry almost said, but he didn't think it was right to continue arguing the point. "I'm just glad they've done so well with it," he said. "Will they be coming by very much during vacation?"

"Sometimes, but not as much as we'd like," said Arthur. "Diagon Alley is open during much of vacation, and they want to keep the shop open almost every day. They're only closing for Christmas Day and New Year's Day, and then only because all the other shops are as well. So they'll be here for some of those two days, at least."

Ron and Ginny walked into the room. "Hey, Harry, thought we heard you," said Ron. "So, how was it with the Aurors? I'm sure Mum and Dad want to hear about it too."

“Hold on, Ron, you know we promised Hermione we’d get her first,” chided Ginny. Then, to Harry, she said, “We popped over to Hermione’s yesterday for a bit, and we decided that she’d come over for dinner tonight so we could all hear the Auror story, and you wouldn’t have to tell it twice. Hang on, I’ll go get her.” She tossed some Floo powder into the fireplace and was off. Less than a minute later, she was back with Hermione. Molly announced that dinner was ready, and they sat down.

“Well, I’ll give you the big news first,” said Harry. “Two things: one, they didn’t want to talk about the spell after all; instead, they gave me three days of Auror training.” Ron gaped in obvious envy. “Second, they fixed it with the Ministry so that I’m officially considered to be of age, right now, and they taught me how to Apparate. I can now do it any time I want.”

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were all stunned, and temporarily speechless. Arthur and Molly didn’t seem especially surprised. “Yes, it’s about time they did that,” said Arthur. “The Ministry should have thought of it themselves. I would have suggested it to them, but it’s so well known how close you are to us, it would have been unseemly for me to suggest it, like I wanted special favors for you. Better that the Aurors did it.”

“You three look like Harry’s just been made Minister of Magic,” Molly teased Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. “It’s just common sense. He’s in significant danger all the time; Disapparating could save his life. Seventeen is an arbitrary age, and it would be stupid to deny him the ability to keep himself safe just because he isn’t of age.”

“Still... that’s so cool, Harry... so, you could have Apparated over here if you’d wanted to? Did you?” asked Ron eagerly.

“No, I took the fireplace,” Harry said. “They gave me a quick course in Apparation customs and manners, and they said it’s always better to take the fireplace if you can, because it’s not as jarring when people appear there.”

Arthur nodded. "Pretty much the same things they tell you at the Apparation Test Center when you get your license. Oh, I don't want to forget to ask. Did they gamble on anything while you were there? Kingsley sometimes tries to get me to join these pools they get going. I tell him that I'll join their pools when I get an Auror's salary."

"Yes, they did. I hadn't known they gambled so much. They had a pool on how quickly I would learn to Apparate."

Molly and Arthur laughed. "Leave it to them..." said Arthur. "So who won, how much money, and with what guess?"

"Tonks, a hundred Galleons, and she said I'd do it on the first try."

Now, the adults were the ones who were extremely impressed. "First try? It took me over two hours," said Arthur. Harry explained why he and Kingsley thought he did it so quickly. "That makes sense," Arthur agreed, "but it's still very impressive. Of course, it's nothing next to what else you've done, but still... Good for Tonks, she must have been very happy."

"Speaking of which, how did it go with her, Harry?" asked a smiling Hermione.

"Pretty well. I tried to take your advice, and it was fun. The other Aurors knew what she was doing, and they thought it was pretty funny. Like, on the second day, she asked me to take a walk with her, and she held my hand the whole time. It was kind of nice, actually. She spent most of the walk giving me advice on what to do when I do get a girlfriend. I just hope I can remember it all."

"So, after learning to Apparate, what did you do?" asked Ron, who seemed less interested in what happened with Tonks than the others.

"I learned how to move around multiple objects at once, so I can hopefully block Killing Curses if I have to. Then in the afternoon, it was dueling." He explained his request to the Aurors, and told about how Neville came to be involved.

“Oh, that was so good of you, Harry,” Hermione gushed. “Neville must have been thrilled.” Ron looked like he was trying to appear nonchalant but doing very badly, which Hermione noticed as well. “Come on, Ron, he can’t always ask for you or I in those situations. It made perfect sense to ask for Neville. He and Harry are about the same skill level dueling, and Neville’s parents were Aurors. He deserved it.”

“I don’t begrudge him that,” said a somewhat chastened Ron. “I just wish it could have been all of us. That would have been so cool..”

“I would have liked to have had all of you, Ron, believe me,” said Harry. “They wouldn’t have taken anyone but Neville. They’re kind of fussy about who visits their training area, but Cassandra has a soft spot for Neville, and she was really surprised when I told her that Neville was the sixth-year dueling champion. So, not only did he stay for the afternoon’s lesson on dueling, but she asked him to stay for the remaining two days as well.” He then launched into the full version of his Auror visit. He had to remember to take bites of his food before it got cold. After ten minutes, he finished.

“That sounds so great, Harry,” said Ginny. “But even better than how cool it is, is how it’ll help if you have to fight anybody. I’m really glad that you’ll be safer.”

“Yeah, me too. Now I feel like I at least have an even shot against a Death Eater, if they’re not too strong a one. Oh, that reminds me, they also showed me how to put down an anti-Disapparation field. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to do one strong enough to stop any of them from Disapparating. Of course, they’re Aurors, so I shouldn’t have expected to be able to, so fast. They say I’ll get better with more training. I was wondering if I could try it on you two,” he said to Arthur and Molly. “I want to know if what I have so far will work on non-Aurors.”

“Sure, Harry,” said Arthur. He stood and Apparated over to the living room. Harry walked over, and put up the field. After a few seconds, Arthur said, “You did

it. I tried to Disapparate but couldn't." He walked back to the table. Harry sat down, satisfied.

"Now, bear in mind, I'm not one of the strongest wizards in the world," added Arthur. "And with my job being what it is, I don't have much occasion to practice. But it's still very good that you can do that much, after a very short time."

"Thanks," said Harry. "I just want to get it to the point where I can stop most Death Eaters from getting away."

"I'm not sure how much good that's going to do, they'll just get away from custody anyway," grumbled Molly.

"Maybe not for long," replied Arthur. "I heard today that they may be taking stronger measures against the ones they have in custody."

"Yes, they were talking about that, at lunch on Sunday," said Harry. To the others, he explained, "The escape on Halloween of the ones they caught in the Department of Mysteries made the Aurors really angry, apparently. The way they talked about it sounded like they don't trust the Ministry to keep guard over these people. Apparently some Aurors want to keep custody of Death Eaters themselves, while some don't want their time taken up by doing that sort of thing. They had an argument at the dining table."

Arthur nodded. "The problem is, we're so used to putting people in Azkaban, we neglected to develop any kind of professional system of secure incarceration. We're going to have to work on that, but the Ministry is dragging its feet. Or was, at least, until the escape. Now, some people are talking about more extreme measures."

"What sort of extreme measures?" asked Hermione.

"For example, putting them under sedation, or some types of spell or potions that affect their ability to move, or act quickly," said Arthur. "Some people are even seriously suggesting that they be put under the Imperius Curse, so they would actually resist attempts by their comrades to break them out. Most people in the Ministry don't approve of that—there is quite a taboo around the Imperius

Curse, given that it's one of the Unforgivable Curses—but the fact that it's even being discussed is an indication of how seriously the situation is being taken.”

“The Aurors seem to have different opinions about it,” added Harry. “A few support the use of the Imperius Curse, but most don't. A few think nothing should be done that affects the prisoners' rights, that we just have to develop a better system of keeping people locked up. The others say there's no time for that, that we can't afford to lose captured Death Eaters while they try to work out a better system. I got the impression that they've had a few arguments about it.”

“I'm not surprised,” said Arthur. “People who harmed or killed Aurors would be the ones escaping, so they would naturally have strong opinions about it.”

“As I listened to them talk,” said Harry, “I couldn't help but think, Hermione, of—“

”Of that day in Hogsmeade, the day before the attack,” she finished. “Yes, me too, it's almost exactly like that.” She explained to the others what they had talked about. “So, the question is, do we do what's expedient, that may save more lives and enhance our security, or do we impose measures we normally wouldn't, measures that could lead down a path to a police state? It's a very serious issue, and judging from our History of Magic lectures, one that almost every generation has to deal with.”

“But the situation is so serious now, I think we have to risk leaning a bit in that direction,” said Molly. “Our society's freedom is at stake. If Voldemort wins, we won't have the luxury of debating what measures to take against prisoners. I don't approve of the use of the Imperius Curse, but as long as Voldemort is around, something stronger needs to be done, even if it's not what we'd normally do.”

“Molly and I have already had discussions about this,” said Arthur. “I wouldn't go as far as she does, but I recognize the validity of her point. That's why it's such a hard issue; the practical aspects can't be dismissed so easily. To just say ‘prisoners' rights must be respected’ and leave it at that just seems very pie-in-the-

sky right now. The slippery-slope argument doesn't seem that important, but I still think it is." Hermione explained the phrase to her fellow students.

"What do you think, Harry?" asked Ginny.

"I'm not sure; the Aurors never asked Neville or I what we thought. Maybe they thought it would be rude to involve us. But just based on what I'm hearing now, I think I'm very close to your mother's opinion. Not that I don't see your father's point, but it has to be a first priority that no more of them escape. Not only because they'll kill people who they otherwise wouldn't if they escape, but if they think they can escape so easily, they'll be really brazen about doing what they want, they won't care about getting caught because they'll always be sure they can escape. That attitude on their parts could lead to even more deaths."

"Exactly, Harry," said Molly emphatically. "Just exactly what I said to Arthur a few days ago. We can't risk that."

"What do you think, Hermione?" asked Arthur.

Hermione looked a little nervous. "For one thing, I think you're asking me because you think I'll think the same way as you," she said, smiling apologetically.

Arthur smiled back. "I keep hearing about how clever you are, Hermione. I see that it's well deserved. And?"

She took a deep breath. "And you're right, I feel very much like you do. Too much has happened in history once people started down this path for me to feel comfortable with it. And like Mr. Weasley," she said to the others, especially Molly and Harry, "I'm not saying that we should do nothing we wouldn't normally do. I know how serious the situation is. But we have to be really, really careful what we do, or before you know it, we'll be rounding up all known werewolves just to be on the safe side."

Harry was very surprised. "What do werewolves have to do with it?"

"The point Hermione's making, and it's a good one," explained Arthur, "is that once you have an atmosphere where you start doing things you wouldn't usually do, it opens the door for people who want to take advantage of it to push

their own fears and prejudices, and to gain power in doing so. Once you take away the rights or liberties of one group, it's that much easier to do it to another. I think she picked werewolves to bring the point home to you a bit better, since you're close to Remus. Remember, Harry, Dolores Umbridge was able to push through that anti-werewolf legislation a few years ago, the one that made Remus's already difficult life much worse. And that was in an atmosphere of no particular danger or alert. What if people started saying that werewolves were more likely to be Dark wizards, and were starting to bite people to gain more recruits? What if it was believed? People will believe a lot in an atmosphere of fear, and politicians will be quick to exploit that. What Hermione suggests may be unlikely to happen, but it's not at all inconceivable." Arthur went on to give a brief lecture on the subject on the fate of Japanese-Americans during World War II. "Far more than ninety-nine percent of those people were loyal American citizens, but they lost four years of their lives and freedom because of their race. The Americans ignored their own laws to do what they did, and most people agreed with it, or didn't debate it strongly. I could give you many, many other historical examples."

Even though she disagreed with him, Molly looked at her husband fondly. "You don't want to get Arthur started on this, he'll talk for hours. He got Outstanding N.E.W.T.s in History of Magic and Muggle Studies. He reads Muggle history books, so I know he knows what he's talking about. I know he has a good point. I just think if we're conscious of the danger, we can avoid it."

"The problem is, Molly, that while you and I may be conscious of the danger, most people won't be. I mean, Harry is rallying people to say Voldemort's name. That's an easy idea to understand, and the reason for it is obvious. But what if he was rallying people to be careful of what measures we take that could deprive people of their liberties? It's a very conceptual, nuanced argument, and if people don't have a good grasp of history, they won't get it. The demagogues shouting about safety would drown Harry out, and people would dismiss him as some nut who doesn't care that people are dying, his personal bravery and accomplishments

notwithstanding. If people aren't aware of the danger, the leadership has to be. If Dumbledore were Minister of Magic, I'd be more confident. But Fudge is just the type who'd take whatever harsh measures that seemed to be justified, with no sense of perspective. He'll follow where people lead him."

There was silence for a few seconds as people digested this. Then Molly said, "Well, at least it's good that we're having this discussion, that's what people should be doing. Harry, dear, you may want to think about this some more, get a clearer feeling about what your opinion is. You're a prominent public figure, and you may be asked about it if the subject becomes a bigger issue. People will listen to what you say. They may not agree, of course, but they'll listen."

Harry's head was swimming; he still didn't have a definite opinion on the subject, and it seemed like something that he shouldn't be deciding, that it should be for people smarter than him. The problem was, Arthur and Hermione were saying that the smart people wouldn't be the ones making the decisions, and he could see that was true, based on what had happened last year. He was also very affected, as Hermione had obviously intended, by what she had said about Remus. He hated to think of Remus locked up for no reason, as hard a life as he had already had. Could stronger measures against prisoners really lead to that? He didn't want to think so, but the people at the table who knew history best seemed to think it was possible. But the idea of more Death Eaters escaping was also terrible. "I just don't know," he finally said. "It seems like we're stuck between equally bad choices. I still think that it's extremely important that we keep the Death Eaters locked up, but I don't want to ignore Hermione and Arthur's concerns, either. One thing I want to do is talk to Remus about this. I'd be very interested to know what he thinks."

"Well, you'll be able to find out, Harry," said Molly. "He'll be joining us for dinner sometime later this week. I'd like to know what he thinks, too." She stood up and started clearing the dishes.

Arthur got up as well. "I'm going upstairs for a bit, so you four can have the living room. See you later," he said as he left the room. Harry and the others headed for the living room.

They had all just entered it when Hermione wheeled on Ron, looking angry, to Harry's great surprise. "All right, Ron, exactly what is your problem?"

Ron reacted as though he'd been slapped for no reason. "What? What are you talking about?"

"You were pouting all through dinner," Hermione said. "You barely heard a word we said about the prisoner situation."

Ron was still mystified, or acting like it. "I didn't have anything to say! Is there something wrong with that?"

"Hermione's right, Ron," added Ginny. "You were really unhappy, it was totally obvious. I was surprised Mum or Dad didn't say anything."

"You're upset," Hermione continued, "because Harry asked Neville to visit the Aurors with him instead of you. What have you got against Neville? Do you think you're more deserving of it than him?"

"Of course not!" Ron almost shouted. He looked at Hermione as if she were a bit loopy, and Harry could understand why. Then Ron angrily said, "I don't have to listen to this," and headed for the door.

Hermione, standing closer, blocked it with her body. "You're not going anywhere until you tell me what your problem is."

Ron couldn't believe it. "This is my house! I can leave the room if I want to!" Hermione just stared at him, angry, unmoving. They stared at each other for a few seconds.

"Hermione," said Harry tentatively, "if he doesn't want to talk about it—"

"Stay out of this, Harry," she said vehemently. Harry immediately decided not to say another word.

Finally Ron walked to the sofa and flopped down onto it. Ginny sat down next to him. “Ron, I admit I don’t know what Hermione’s so upset about, but it was pretty obvious that you were upset at dinner. If you could tell us—“

”It has absolutely nothing to do with Neville, that’s for sure,” said Ron, looking angrily at Hermione. Ginny looked at him expectantly. Ron moaned, obviously feeling trapped. “Look,” he said to Ginny, almost pleading. “You know I’d rather have teeth pulled than talk about this kind of thing. I just... got upset, that’s all. I’ll deal with it, it’ll be fine. Just leave me alone.”

Harry wished for Ron’s sake they would, but Hermione obviously wasn’t going to let it go. “Ron, you were angry at either Neville or Harry, and neither of them deserves it. I want to know which one, and why.”

“Hermione, I said I’d get over it! Since when do we have to have some big conversation about it? This kind of thing has always worked itself out without that,” argued Ron.

“Yeah, look how well it worked itself out in fourth year, when Harry got stuck in the Triwizard competition,” said Hermione in a low but angry voice. “You two didn’t talk for, what, a month? You know how hard that was for me, being in the middle of that? Trying to persuade you two idiots to just have one conversation, where you could have worked it out in just a few minutes, like eventually happened? But no, neither of you would talk to the other. I’m not going to have that happen again, Ron, so yes, we’re going to talk about it. What is your problem? Are you mad that Harry asked Neville and not you?”

Ron had his head in his hands, clearly frustrated but also embarrassed, seeming to know that she would get out of him what she wanted to. “It’s not like that, exactly,” he said, finally dropping his defenses. “I mean, I felt a bit like that, but I know it was wrong. All the arguments are right, Neville’s a better dueler than I am, and his parents... I know that. That feeling... I was jealous, I guess... would have gone away in just a minute. But it’s something else.” He paused, thinking. Harry

almost ached with empathy for what Ron was going through, admitting something personal when it was the last thing he wanted to do.

Finally, Ron continued. “Harry’s become a teacher. He goes off to the staff room, someplace we can’t go. We do take the advanced lessons from Dumbledore with him, but only because he asked; Dumbledore would have just as soon given them to him alone. Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape talk to him about Order stuff, stuff that I’m sure he isn’t allowed to talk to us about. Then this Auror thing. I just feel like...” He breathed heavily, then continued. “Like Harry’s drifting away from us... from me. The whole wizarding society is grabbing for pieces of him, and there won’t be enough to go around as it is. I remember the way it was with the three of us, and I feel like it won’t ever be that way anymore.” He paused, then glared at Hermione. “There. You happy now?”

Harry looked at Hermione, who was near tears. She ran over to the sofa, sat down next to Ron, and pulled him into a hug. “I’m sorry, Ron,” she said through tears. “I’m really sorry, I had no idea...”

Fighting back emotion, Ron said, “Will you stop crying, you’ll get me doing it.”

Ginny was looking at Ron with great sympathy. “I think you know that Harry’s never going to let that happen. He’s not the type to get impressed by people grabbing for his attention, flattering him, whatever. He appreciates what the Aurors did because he wants to become one. But he resists being grabbed at pretty well. It’s not going to happen.”

“I kind of know that,” said Ron, still being held by Hermione. “I know I’m being stupid, and that it’s not going to happen like that. Like I said, I would have gotten over it. I guess it was just bad timing, and I didn’t know I was being so obvious about how I felt.”

Harry finally spoke. “Ron,” he said quietly, “if someone asked me in an interview what the best day of my life was, I would say it was the day in first year when I took the Hogwarts Express to school. I made a friend, the first one I ever

had.” Now Ginny was almost crying as well. “I want you guys to be as much a part of my life as possible. I need you, I depend on you. You’re what got me through the stuff this year. No matter how much I get pulled, I’m never going to—“

”All right, all right, Harry, I know,” said Ron, withdrawing from Hermione’s embrace, still fighting off his own tears. “Like I said, it would have gone away. Just a stupid feeling, is all it was.”

“But it’s still better to talk about things like that, Ron,” said Hermione earnestly. “What if this kind of thing had happened more? You might have felt more and more like that, but not said anything, and started drifting away from Harry because of it. This can be the kind of thing that causes friendships to be lost. It really is a good idea to talk once in a while.” Ron, still composing himself, had no reaction to Hermione’s words.

“Sorry, Ron,” said Harry. “I know you probably didn’t need me to say that much, that you really knew it already. But it felt good to say it. So I suppose I was being selfish.” Ron smiled, and the girls laughed.

“Yes, Harry, you’re so well known for being selfish,” Ginny teased. “So now, Hermione, since you practically pinned Ron down and forced him to say what he was thinking, I think it’s only fair that you do too. You seemed to be angry at him way out of proportion to what was going on. Why were you so angry? What did you think he thought?”

“Well, I’m sure Ron doesn’t care to know...” said Hermione hesitantly.

“No, after all that production, I really would like to know,” said Ron. He looked at Hermione.

She sighed heavily. “I probably wouldn’t have said anything, but now that I’ve done this, I suppose it’s not fair of me not to tell you... I thought you were mad at Neville, that you didn’t want him being more of a part of our group. He’s been getting more comfortable with us, and us with him, and it’s nice. This thing with Harry and the Aurors is bound to boost his confidence, make him feel better about

himself, which he really needs. He's had a hard life. I thought that you were trying to shut him out."

Ron shook his head. "That was the last thing I was thinking, Hermione. I like Neville fine, I'm happy to have him as one of our group. It's nothing like that."

"I know, I know that now," she acknowledged. "And I'm sorry again for reacting like that."

"But why would you react like that anyway, Hermione?" asked Ginny. "Why would it be something that you would..." She trailed off as she saw the look on Hermione's face. "Oh, wow..." said Ginny suddenly, eyes wide.

"What?" asked Ron impatiently.

"I'm..." Hermione paused for a few seconds. "I have feelings for Neville which are more than friendship," she said. She looked around for people's reactions.

Harry felt totally stunned; he had not expected anything like this. "Wow... I had no idea..." He looked at Hermione, who looked anxious to know what people thought. "I'd never even thought about that before, but... Neville really is a good guy. I'm happy for you."

"Thank you, Harry, it means so much to me for you to say that. But this is still really early, I don't know what's going to happen. He doesn't know yet, of course. I'm kind of afraid to tell him. I don't know how he'll react."

"I would think he would be thrilled, Hermione," Harry said. Ginny nodded approvingly.

Hermione looked dubious. "I hope so, but you never know. Maybe he just doesn't look at me that way. Maybe he'll think he's not ready to have a girlfriend. I mean, Neville has gotten much less shy, but this is a pretty big thing. I just don't know what he'll do. I'm worried."

"I can understand that," agreed Ginny. "But I'm with Harry, I really think he'll be happy."

Ron looked like he was barely starting to understand what Hermione had said. “Well,” he finally said, “I guess now I understand why you were so mad. I don’t know what to say, Hermione, except that I hope it works out.”

“Thank you, Ron,” she said. “I’m glad you three feel like you do. I knew you would, I know we all like Neville, but I was still nervous, of course. I’m sure I still will be, until I tell him.”

“You should tell him when we all get together,” said Ginny enthusiastically. “There’ll never be a better time for it, you know how hard it is to get privacy at the school. Just tell him you need to talk to him privately, take him into my room, and tell him. Maybe if he’s interested, you could spend some time with him before school starts again, like you two could go to Diagon Alley together or something.”

Hermione nodded. “That does make sense,” she admitted. “I thought of that too. It’s just... actually telling him is going to be nerve-wracking. I’ve never done anything like this before. Part of me would have preferred to put it off, but you’re right, now is the best time.”

“First the Aurors, then you... he’ll think he’s died and gone to heaven,” Harry said, smiling.

“Oh, Harry, that’s so sweet of you to say,” Hermione said gratefully. “I hope you’re right, I really do. Now I just want... what’s the day he’s coming over? Thursday? Now I just want Thursday to be here, so I don’t have to worry about it anymore, it’ll just be done. Oh, I’m so nervous.”

“He will be too, Hermione, once you tell him,” said Ron, grinning.

Harry nodded. “I think you can expect astonishment, a bit like I felt when Dumbledore asked me to take the teaching job. He may need you to confirm what you said. I mean, if any girl came up to me and said what you’re going to say to him, I’d need some time to—“

”Run away?” asked Ginny, smiling. Ron laughed out loud.

“I’m the brave Harry Potter, I do not run away,” he said with exaggerated dignity as the rest laughed. “Think about how I felt, is what I was going to say. Also

think about whether I felt brave enough to have a girlfriend. At least that won't be something Neville has to worry about."

"How would you feel, Ron?" Ginny asked. Harry wasn't sure if she was really curious or just wanted to tease Ron.

"If it was Hermione, you mean?" he asked. Harry and Ginny laughed.

Hermione sniffed and said, "Oh, you're so nice, Ron, what girl wouldn't want you?" causing Harry and Ginny to laugh more.

"No, just a girl you liked," clarified Ginny, "but who you had no idea would be interested in you."

"I don't know... I suppose go out a few times and see what happened," Ron said. "It would really depend on who it was, of course. It's just hard to say."

There was silence for a minute. Then Ginny said, "Wow, this is so strange... Now even I feel like I can't wait for Thursday to get here, I want to know what happens. I can really understand how Hermione feels."

"Well, let's talk about something else," said Hermione. "Maybe I'll get distracted and I won't be so nervous." They talked about other things, and Harry showed them some of what he'd learned over the past few days. He, too, couldn't help but wonder what would happen on Thursday.

Harry woke up on Wednesday, Christmas morning, to see Ron still sleeping in his bed on the other side of the room. Harry could have stayed in Fred and George's old room, but he and Ron preferred to sleep in the same room so they could talk as late as they wanted. Harry started to walk out of the room quietly, but Ron said, "I'm up, just not up enough to get out of bed." Harry waited until Ron got up, and they went downstairs.

Everybody was at the dining room table, including Fred and George, who greeted Harry and Ron. "Oh, good, you're up, I was just about to call you down," said Molly, dishing out breakfast onto people's plates. "I remember when you lot

were little, nothing could keep you from rushing to the tree and tearing your presents open.”

“Sorry, Mum, but we grew up,” said George.

“But we still have our boyish charm,” added Fred.

“So how were your Christmas sales?” asked Harry as he sat down.

“Excellent, Harry, thank you for asking,” said Fred. “Yesterday was our busiest day ever. The day before Christmas, so naturally, but it was still impressive. We hardly got a chance to sit down all day.”

“Three months later, Harry, but people still mention your name, and what you said in that article,” said George. “Thanks again.”

“That did even better for us than the Special Services award,” agreed Fred. “They don’t mention those in the paper.”

“Couldn’t have had them mention us on the back of your Chocolate Frog card, though?” joked George. Harry laughed. “We don’t usually sell them, but we’re going to just for January. Not absolutely in keeping with the motif of the shop, mind you, but we’re sure they’re going to be a big seller. I just wish we could advertise it in the window now, let people know we’ll have them, but they’re not being announced until the day before they’re actually released on the second of January.”

“You should come down to the shop then, Harry, have a bit of a meet and greet with your adoring public,” urged Fred. Ron and Ginny laughed at the idea that that was something Harry would want to do.

“Good idea, Fred,” said Harry agreeably. “I haven’t had nearly enough people stare at me all my life. Very thoughtful of you.”

“It’s no problem, Harry, really,” said Fred.

“It’s just the way we are,” added George.

The conversation around the table mainly centered around the twins and their shop, as they weren’t around the Burrow so much. After breakfast, everyone went into the living room and sat down near the tree. Harry enjoyed watching the

Weasleys open their presents. Arthur was delighted with his gift from Harry: a portable compact-disc player, twenty batteries, and ten compact discs. Harry explained how the player worked, and the Weasleys were very interested in how the disc spun in the player. Harry said, "The twenty batteries won't last forever, of course... is there a way to recharge batteries by using magic?"

"I believe, Harry," said George, "that you have thrown down a gauntlet which Dad will not be able to stop himself from picking up."

"Now that I have something to use the batteries with, I think I'll find a way, Harry. Thank you very much," said Arthur.

"As for the compact discs," added Harry, "of course I didn't have a clue what you would like, so I told them your gender and age and had them include what's most common for people like you to buy."

"What age did you tell them he was, Harry?" asked Ginny, grinning.

"I knew someone was going to ask me that as soon as I said the word 'age,'" said Harry. "I thought it would be Fred or George, though."

"What, I can't have a go at you?" asked Ginny.

"Of course, Ginny. I wouldn't want you any other way." The Weasleys laughed. Then Molly said, "So, what age did you—"

She was interrupted by louder laughter from the rest of the family. Harry smiled at Molly. "You, too, I see... well, I'll whisper it to you, and you can tell them if I'm not off by more than five years." He leaned over and whispered, "Forty-eight." She chuckled and repeated it to the room. "Not bad, Harry," said Arthur. "Only off by one year, I'm forty-nine. I assume you went by the ages of the children."

Harry nodded. "I'm pretty bad at telling ages."

"Want to guess my age, Harry?" asked Molly, now enjoying herself. There was more laughter.

"Let's put it this way: I'd rather go down to Diagon Alley and sign autographs for an hour," Harry replied. Molly laughed and mussed his hair. She

leaned forward and picked up a card, which was Harry's gift to her. She opened it up. Harry had written: "Dear Molly, I lost my mother at a very young age. But I was lucky, because I found another really good one later on. You've always been so good to me, and I wanted to let you know how important it's been to me. Thank you very much for everything you've done for me. I love you. Love, Harry."

She turned to him, eyes already moist with tears, and pulled him to her, hugging him tightly. "I love you too, Harry," she said. Harry hugged her back tightly, and whispered, "I really mean it." She nodded, looked at him proudly, and kissed him on the cheek. Arthur had picked up and read the card silently. "That was very sweet, Harry, thank you," he said, smiling.

Ginny was smiling as well. "I assume, Harry, that whatever you wrote is something you couldn't have managed to write last year?" Harry chuckled. "Yes, that's safe to say," he agreed. He saw the twins grin at each other but say nothing.

Molly reached and took two more cards, from Harry to Ron and Ginny, and handed them over. Taking in their expressions, Fred said, "This should be good. Ginny is hoping Harry said something to her like he said to Mum—"

"—and Ron is afraid that he did," finished George.

Ginny opened hers first, and read silently. Harry had written, "Dear Ginny, I really do wish you were the same year as us. You're as important to me as anyone, and I'm very happy for whatever time we get to spend with you. I'm glad you like my new direction. You're great, and I love you. Love, Harry." She smiled and stepped over for her hug. "It's a very, very good direction, Harry," she said as she hugged him.

As she stepped back, George said, "Yes, I think Ron's looking pretty nervous right about now."

Ron gave them an annoyed look and opened his card. To Harry's surprise, he read his out loud. "Dear Ron, I wanted to express my gratitude for your friendship, but I know that emotional displays make you uncomfortable. I respect

that, and so I won't write anything that would embarrass you. I'll just say Happy Christmas, and have a good year. Regards, Harry. P.S. I love you."

The Weasleys burst out in loud laughter, and even Ron laughed after giving Harry an obligatory annoyed look. "Oh, Harry, that was really good," Ginny said between laughs. "Very well done."

Harry felt wonderful. This is what Christmas should be like, he thought. He felt very lucky.

"Hey, there's something in mine," said Ron. He took out a small piece of paper and started reading it. "There's one in Ginny's, too," Harry said. "It's the same thing. They're gift certificates for a department store in London, I mean Muggle London, of course. I was hoping we could all go, you could use those, we could make a day of it."

"That's very nice, Harry," said Ginny. "The card is the best gift, though."

"Somehow I don't think Ron's going to be inclined to agree with that," said George.

"In the amount of one hundred pounds," read Ron from the certificate. "How much is that in Galleons?"

"I thought you weren't supposed to ask how much a gift cost," replied Harry with amusement. Ron rolled his eyes. "I'm pretty sure it's less than what your father's stuff cost, if that makes you feel any better," Harry half-assured, half-chided Ron. "I just thought it might be interesting for you to go shopping in a Muggle store. You can get all types of stuff, that's the good thing about department stores. So you should be able to find something you like."

"So, when should we go?" asked Ron. Harry was grateful that he had dropped the subject of the cost, for now at least.

"How about Friday?" asked Ginny. "Tomorrow we have everyone coming over, so that's probably the best time." Harry and Ron agreed. They continued opening presents, but Harry felt that just being at the Burrow was the best gift he could have hoped for.

The rest of Christmas Day was equally pleasant; Harry entertained Fred and George by showing more of what the Aurors had taught him. Ron expressed frustration that as he was still underage, he couldn't practice dueling with Harry until they got back to Hogwarts. Fred and George could, but neither of them lasted more than ten seconds against Harry, to Ron's amusement. ("Well, we didn't get any instruction in seventh year, did we?" pointed out George.) They flew around on their brooms for a while, fooling around, doing Quidditch moves, Ginny having joined them. "We just need two more Chasers, and we've got a pretty good Quidditch team here," said George. Later they had a large and filling Christmas dinner, also attended by Bill and Charlie. Harry thought he saw on Molly's face a few times her sadness at Percy's absence, but she never said anything about it. Harry hoped that she and Arthur weren't arguing about it.

That evening, they all sat in the living room drinking eggnog and talking. At one point, they were interrupted by the sound of what was obviously a boggart in a large chest in the corner. Molly got up to get rid of it, but Harry asked her to leave it for him to do tomorrow. He explained that he was thinking of using a boggart in a few of his classes, as Lupin had, and wanted to practice on this one first. She agreed, and from then on their conversation was punctuated by the occasional thump. Harry was pleased to see that Arthur had already been working on the compact disc player; not only had he discovered how to recharge the batteries, but had found a way to play the audio over the air, even in the absence of speakers. One of the compact discs had been of Christmas songs, and they listened to that as they talked. Again, Harry couldn't have felt more at home.

At 4:00 on Thursday, Harry, Ron, and Ginny sat in the Weasley living room, waiting for their guests. Fawkes had joined Harry, and was currently on his shoulder. At a few minutes before four, Pansy walked out of the fireplace. She cheerfully greeted them, and sat down with them and talked. Neville showed up five minutes later, and Hermione five minutes after that. Harry felt that Hermione was dressed a

little more nicely than was usual for her, but he thought it could have been his imagination. Neville and Pansy were given a tour of the house, after which they sat and talked in the living room until dinner.

Pansy and Neville seemed a bit overwhelmed by the experience, especially at dinner. “I don’t think I’ve ever eaten with this many people, except at Hogwarts,” she said, and was seconded by Neville.

“Oh, this isn’t that much, Pansy,” said Molly, just sitting down after making sure everyone had enough food. “It used to be that we had more than this, just with the immediate family.”

“I’m an only child,” Pansy said. “It must be interesting to be in such a large family. I guess it hasn’t been quiet around here most of the time.”

Molly nodded. “I must admit I’m dreading Ginny leaving home,” she said wistfully. “There have been children here for over twenty-five years. The idea of just Arthur and I here makes me sad. No offense, dear.”

Arthur chuckled in response. “That’s all right, I know I’m not the most exciting person in the world,” he said with a smile. “That’s what the kids were for.”

Molly continued, “I must say, we were hoping to have a grandchild by now, but no such luck. I try not to badger Bill and Charlie about not being married yet.”

“I’m sure they appreciate your restraint, dear,” said Arthur wryly. She frowned at him as Ron and Ginny chuckled.

“Seven children, you’d expect we’d have loads of grandchildren,” she said. “Within ten years, for sure. Ron, Ginny, Harry, keep that in mind.” Harry looked a bit startled to be included. “Yes, Harry,” she said to him, “you are a member of this family, after all. Any child you have, I will consider a grandchild, so you remember that.”

Harry saw Hermione and Pansy looking at him fondly, obviously touched by what Molly had said. “I will, Molly,” he said. “As soon as Voldemort’s dealt with, I’ll get right on it.”

“I know you’re joking, but I hope you won’t wait for that. We have to live our lives, after all. Even you, target on your head notwithstanding.” Harry just nodded, as it was easier than arguing.

“Don’t worry, Harry, nothing’s going to happen to you,” said Hermione. “You have us, remember?”

“Yes, it’s hard to argue with that,” he conceded. “Actually, that reminds me of something I wanted to mention at some point. Something the Aurors said. We were talking, and somehow the subject of how you guys saved me at Hogsmeade came up. Neville said, ‘Thank goodness we had already studied the Diffusion Shield.’ They just looked at each other like they knew something we didn’t. I spent the next few minutes trying to get them to tell me what they were thinking. Finally Cassandra said that the Diffusion Shield is, as far as they’re concerned, a much less important spell, because of how rarely it comes into use. They were very surprised that Dumbledore taught it to us at all, never mind in the first lesson. She said they all thought that Dumbledore taught it to us specifically so that it could be used to save me, and for no other reason.”

There was silence around the table, and many surprised looks. Finally Molly said, “Well, neither Arthur nor I are experts on this sort of thing, but isn’t it possible that Dumbledore just has a different opinion of this spell than they do, and he just thought it was a good thing for them to know?”

“I asked that,” said Neville. “They dismissed the idea immediately. They seemed really sure, and they are the experts on this sort of thing. They’re absolutely sure that he taught it to us so we could save Harry. I said, ‘so, even if he did, what’s wrong with that?’ Cassandra said that they thought it was morally questionable, since because the shield’s effect against the Killing Curse was so unpredictable, just teaching us the spell was like deliberately putting our lives at risk. They’re sure he wouldn’t have taught it to us if not for Harry.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” said Hermione. “If I’d been the one targeted, you guys would have done it for me, including Harry, then he would be at the same risk we had been.”

“Harry said that,” said Neville. “They said that the whole point is that Dumbledore had to know, or could guess very accurately, that Harry would be the one targeted. They said, Harry’s the Death Eaters’ number one target, and if they can take a shot at anyone, it’s totally obvious it’ll be Harry. Harry and I thought of three or four arguments, and they shot down each one. They were really sure. Kingsley said, ‘It worked out for the best, so maybe this is just Dumbledore being wise beyond what we can understand. But it seemed like an awful chance. Neville and the others could be dead.’ Of course I told him I was glad he taught it to us, and the rest of you were too. He said, ‘I know, that’s what makes it morally questionable.’”

“So, that’s kind of bothered me,” Harry said. “I mean, it’s hard enough for me to accept people risking their lives for me, much as I appreciate what you did,” and he looked at Ron, Hermione, and Neville in turn. “But the idea that he deliberately put you at such huge risk for my sake is kind of disturbing.”

“But Harry, he didn’t put us at risk,” protested Hermione. “We did that, we chose to. All he was doing was giving us the means to do what he knew we would have wanted to do. He knew we would want to take the risk. If there was a safer way of stopping the Killing Curse, he would have taught it to us. But there isn’t, so he did what he could. You told us that he’s been conscience-stricken many times after asking or allowing people to take risks that ended up getting them killed, but that he also understood that those people made their own choices and were proud of them. He understands that, and I’m sure he would have been terribly upset if we had been killed, and blamed himself. But he also knew it was our choice, and that we would want the ability to make the choice we wanted. I don’t see anything morally questionable about that.”

“I told them that was how I felt,” said Neville, “and that you and Ron would too. And I don’t mean to exclude you two,” he said, looking at Pansy and Ginny, “because I know you would have done it if you’d been there. Anyway, I got kind of annoyed, because it was as though I wasn’t responsible for what I did, as if you two and I were Dumbledore’s puppets or something. I said that even if he did do it deliberately, there was still nothing wrong with it, because Harry has to be kept alive, at any cost. If he’s the one who can beat Voldemort, losing a hundred people to keep him alive is worth it.”

Harry looked mortified. “God, Neville, don’t say that, I can’t even deal with thinking about that. I don’t know if I could function if that happened.”

The rest looked at him sympathetically. Ron said, “I agree with Neville, of course, both about the Diffusion Shield and keeping Harry alive. It could end up saving hundreds or thousands of lives. You could easily argue that what Dumbledore did was for the greater good, and so morally okay.”

“I agree, of course, Ron,” said Arthur. “But you have to keep in mind that it’s possible for something to be for the greater good and still be morally questionable. Remember our conversation from Monday night.” He briefly summarized it for Neville and Pansy, who hadn’t been there, then continued. “In fact, quite often what is for the greater good is morally questionable. So they have a reasonable point.”

“It does seem to me,” said Molly, “that when they have that discussion, they forget how many lives Dumbledore is holding in his hands, so to speak. Fudge may have the political authority, but Dumbledore is the one with the moral authority, the one people will die for. That’s a huge burden, one I doubt they fully appreciate. He has to think about who will die because of what he did, or because of what he didn’t do. Like Neville said, Harry’s life could be worth hundreds. Maybe that doesn’t affect the strict question of whether what Dumbledore did was moral or not, but it’s ridiculous to not consider it at all. If you’re responsible for the lives that are lost, of course you’re going to consider it.”

Everyone seemed to agree with this, and no one said anything for a moment. Then Harry said. “Anyway, I will ask Dumbledore about this thing with the Diffusion Shield. Much as I hate to see you risk your lives like that, I understand how you feel, since I’d want to for you, I’d want to know I had that option. So I’m not going to be angry at him for helping you risk your lives. I just want to know how he would respond to the Aurors’ feelings about it.”

There was silence for a few seconds, as no one had anything more to say on the topic. Then Pansy asked, “Mr. Weasley, you work for the Ministry... what’s the attitude there right now? How do they feel about what Harry’s doing?”

“It may be that I’m not the best person to ask, Pansy,” said Arthur, “because it’s so well known that Harry’s very close to us, nobody’s going to say anything bad about Harry directly to me. But some people tell me what others say. It seems that a lot of people admire and support him. But the problem is, some of those people—who I don’t necessarily doubt are telling the truth—are the same ones who were fine with the trashing he took in the Prophet last year. So his support may be wide, as they say, but I’m not sure how deep it is. There are plenty of opportunists, people who’ll flow whichever way the wind is blowing. Still, it’s an improvement over last year. We just have to hope the wind doesn’t change direction.”

“It’s not likely to, is it?” Pansy asked. “I mean, now that everyone knows that Voldemort’s back, isn’t the Ministry going to be focused on stopping him?”

“I hope so, Pansy, and probably yes,” replied Arthur. “I’ve just been at the Ministry too long to take anything for granted. I mean, I should explain, I work there but I don’t have a lot to do with it. See, I’m well known for being fond of Muggles—too fond, many think—and I’m happy to work in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, which is considered a career backwater, someplace you get put if you’re not in favor. I have no chance of advancing, and I don’t care. I’m happy with what I do, and I’d want no part of high-level politics anyway. My point is, my only real connection to the Ministry is that I work there, not because of any influence I might have over anything. But of course I hear a lot of things. And yes, they are

focused on stopping Voldemort, but people still jockey for influence, and put their personal interests above stopping Voldemort. Some people, anyway.” He had an especially dark look.

“Wonder who he means,” said Ginny to Ron, quietly. Ron grunted in agreement.

“That’s enough, you two,” said Molly.

“It’s not only him,” said Arthur. “I didn’t even mean him specifically, but the shoe fits. It’s a lot of people, and it gets stronger the higher up the ladder you go.”

“Excuse me, I’m sorry,” said Pansy, “but... him who?”

Molly looked upset at Ron, Ginny, and Arthur. Arthur didn’t appear to be bothered, though he could obviously tell. “Sorry, Pansy, I know you and maybe Neville don’t know about this. Hermione, you do, of course.” She nodded somberly. “Everybody at the Ministry knows, Molly, I don’t see why it should be any secret.”

“I know it’s not a secret, it’s just not something I like to discuss at the dinner table,” replied Molly unhappily. She clearly knew an explanation had to be given.

“They’re talking about Percy, our third son,” said Arthur. He went on to explain what had happened. “So he’ll probably rise fairly quickly in the Ministry, since his actions have made it clear to Fudge and people like him that it’s the Ministry’s interests he’ll look out for and nobody else’s, including his family. It’s hard for us, it’s almost like having a death in the family. Now he talks to Molly occasionally, since she’s the only family member who’ll talk to him without an apology on his part. He acts like he wants to be a part of the family again, and maybe he does, but he seems to have no concept of how he betrayed us, and no remorse for it. I can’t forgive him for what he did unless he understands it was wrong. If he really doesn’t think it was wrong, then there’s just nothing to say.”

“Harry, dear,” said Molly, who then smiled sadly at the look of alarm that crossed Harry’s face. “I’m sorry, I can see that you don’t want to be asked, but you are a family member, and I want to know what you think.”

“Are you sure you don’t know some people who’d like autographs instead?” he nervously joked, then paused before speaking. “Molly, I don’t blame you for feeling like you do. He’s your son, and I can’t know what that feels like. But me, I’m like them, I wouldn’t talk to him unless he’d realized what he’d done. He knew me personally, he knew I wasn’t some nutter. He knew Dumbledore, what kind of person he is. He made a deliberate choice, and because of people like him, we got a late start on fighting Voldemort. Who knows how many lives that could cost. He chose himself over you, over what was right. It’s not too late for anyone to change their choices, and if he did, I’d welcome him, if I thought he was genuine. People make mistakes. But to me, to forgive what he did to the family that easily means that it didn’t matter. It matters a lot, I think.”

Molly looked at him, then said, “Don’t worry, Harry, I’m not going to be angry at you. Everyone else in the family has said what you said, more or less. I see the point, of course. It’s just harder for me to see it that way. Maybe mothers are just too soft. And while I’ll talk to him without preconditions, I did make sure he knew he couldn’t be welcomed back until he had made substantial amends. I think he wants to, he just can’t get himself to do it. Too much pride.”

“He only wants to,” said Ron heatedly, “because we’re on the right side now, as far as he’s concerned. If Fudge hadn’t seen Voldemort with his own eyes, Percy would still be laughing along with the people sticking it to Harry and Dumbledore in the Prophet. You remember what he said about Harry in that letter.”

“Well, I think this is enough of that,” Molly said. “Pansy, Neville, Hermione, you shouldn’t have had to listen to that.” She cast a stern glance at Ginny, who she obviously held responsible for starting the topic.

“It’s all right, Mrs. Weasley,” said Neville. “We don’t mind. We feel bad for you, but we don’t mind.”

Molly smiled at him. “Thank you, Neville, you’re a sweetie.” Harry exchanged a smile with Hermione. “You know,” said Molly, no doubt eager for a

chance to change the subject, “we had a chance to talk to your grandmother in November. She’s a very distinguished lady. And she was very proud of you.”

“I know, she told me,” said Neville embarrassedly. “But I think she was as proud of me for mentioning my parents in the article as she was for me helping to save Harry.”

“I read that, Neville,” said Pansy. “That was very brave of you. You knew that what happened later would happen. I’m sure that wasn’t easy.” She went on to explain to Arthur and Molly what had happened in the Herbology class.

“It shouldn’t take that much bravery, really,” said Neville. “Especially by sixth year, it’s not the kind of thing most people are going to make fun of you for. They know better by then. I should know enough not to care what people like Malfoy say. Anyway, Harry’s been taking stuff off him for years. He deals with it.”

“He never made fun of my having lost my parents, though,” pointed out Harry.

“C’mon, Harry, you’re the Boy Who Lived,” replied Neville. “If he had, the whole school would’ve beaten him to death. He knew he couldn’t do that. But he would’ve if he could’ve.”

“He did in the Slytherin common room,” said Pansy. “Even there it wasn’t really popular. But anyway, Neville, I still think it was brave.”

“We all think so, Neville,” said Hermione. Molly nodded.

“Well, fortunately, most people have been really good about it, so that was nice,” said Neville. “Not that I’m eager for unsolicited sympathy, as I’ve already told these three, but I know they mean well.”

There seemed to be nothing more to say on that topic, so Arthur tried a new one. “Say, I noticed there were quite a few owls this morning. Did we just get a lot of mail, or—“

”That was Harry,” said Ginny. “Thank-you letters from his first years.” To their parents’ quizzical looks, she explained what he had done. “I think he got about twenty-five or so.”

“It was almost embarrassing,” said Harry. “No, not almost, it was embarrassing. I have a very hard time getting used to stuff like that.”

“I read some of it, and I thought it was great,” said Ginny. “Okay, they got a bit carried away, but I enjoyed reading it.”

“I can only imagine what his Slytherins said,” said Pansy. “Sometimes I talk to them in their dormitories. I do get the impression that Harry is a godlike figure to them.” She smiled at him teasingly. “I encourage this sort of thinking, of course.”

The Weasleys, Hermione, and Neville all laughed, while Harry stared at her, trying to pretend to be annoyed. “I love to tease Harry,” continued Pansy. “But really, Harry, they put you on a Chocolate Frog card, you drove Voldemort off, you invented this great new spell, and they’re eleven years old. Can you really expect any other reaction? Not to mention, they get a personalized card from you. Not only legendary, but thoughtful too. I wouldn’t mind seeing those letters either, come to think of it.”

“Maybe if you promise not to make fun of me,” said Harry.

“C’mon, that would be the best part,” replied Pansy. “You’re cute when you’re embarrassed.”

“I think I remember Tonks saying that on the last day,” said Neville, smiling.

“Now, don’t you start,” Harry said, pointing a finger at Neville, to more laughter. He sighed. “This would be so much easier if I were egotistical.”

“If you were egotistical, Harry, they wouldn’t love you the way they do,” said Arthur. “They can tell that you’re not.”

“Well, why is it that I can’t enjoy that kind of thing?” Harry asked, almost plaintively. “It just embarrasses me. You’d think someone who people felt that way about would just enjoy it. All I want to do is run away.”

Nobody spoke for a moment. Then Hermione said seriously, “Does that bother you, Harry? That you can’t enjoy it?”

Harry shrugged. “I’m not sure I would say that, exactly, but I guess it makes me feel like there’s something wrong with me, like this isn’t how most people would react.”

To Harry’s surprise, Ron spoke. “Not everyone can be Lockhart, mate. I’d be embarrassed too, I think. But now the problem is, it’s not just being the Boy Who Lived anymore. You did something phenomenal in September—sorry, I know you don’t like hearing that, but it’s true—and now even if somebody exaggerates when they praise you, there’s at least some truth in there. I think one problem is that you don’t see what you did in September the same way others do. I mean, Hermione and I were awestruck, and we know you better than anybody. We know your faults and flaws, we have a perspective. Most people don’t know you like that. They only see the stuff that’s amazing, and they probably think that’s the way you are in every way. So they don’t see the ordinary parts of you, and you don’t see the exceptional parts of you. No wonder you and they see you so differently.”

Everyone looked at Ron. “That was very impressive, Ron,” said Hermione, clearly trying not to sound like her compliment was a backhanded put-down. “He’s right, of course, Harry. You may need to adjust your ego to account for the impressiveness of what you did. Then you might be able to enjoy it a little. Of course, you shouldn’t enjoy it too much, either. There’s not much danger of that, though. But you did something remarkable. There’s no reason you should have to be embarrassed about enjoying it, or enjoying the reactions from it.”

“Harry, I’m sorry,” said Pansy, looking serious. “I shouldn’t have made fun of you being so modest. I didn’t know this actually bothered you. Maybe I should just give up making fun of anybody, altogether.”

“No! Don’t do that,” said Harry urgently, surprising her. “Pansy, I like it that you tease me the way you do. It’s how I know you’re comfortable with me. I’d be really upset if you stopped. You’re getting down on yourself again about your past, but this is nothing like that. You mean it affectionately.” He looked into her eyes.

She looked back for a few seconds, then smiled. “You’re cute when you’re earnest, Harry.” He smiled back. “Yes, you’re right, I do bring up my past too quickly when I beat myself up about something. It’s just so easy to do. So I’ll try not to, and you work on that modesty thing.”

Harry reluctantly nodded. “Okay, I’ll try, if only so you’ll stop beating yourself up.”

Molly smiled. “So, you two have only known each other for three months now? Seems like a lot longer.”

Pansy explained how they’d met once or twice a week to talk, and why. “It’s been a very concentrated three months. So it feels like a lot longer.” She sighed, then said, “Oh, I dread January. Malfoy gets out of his little prison, and I have to start acting like I care again.” She looked at Harry sharply, as if in warning.

“What did he do?” asked Neville curiously.

“It’s what he was going to do,” replied Pansy.

“I wasn’t going to!” Harry protested.

“Yes, but you wanted to.”

“Yes, but I didn’t. Don’t I get some credit for that?”

Now she smiled, and explained to the rest. “Harry wants me to come out in the open, because he cares more for my comfort than for his safety. But I still think that Malfoy wants to kill him if he gets a chance, so I won’t come out in the open. I can do a lot of good where I am. But Harry, you need to understand,” she said, sounding serious now, “that what I’m doing is difficult. You help a lot, and now so do Hermione and Ginny. But it’s still hard. I chose to do it, I want to do it. But sometimes I need to be able to complain without you telling me every single time to come out in the open. It makes me feel like I shouldn’t complain, but I feel like I need to. Does that make any sense?”

Harry nodded guiltily. “I’m sorry, Pansy. It’s not that I mind you complaining, it’s just that...”

“You worry about me, I know. Harry, I really can take care of myself. Please, try not to worry so much.”

“That’s kind of hard. I know what I should do, of course. When you complain, I should say, ‘Pansy, what you’re doing for me is wonderful, and I really appreciate it.’”

“Yes, that would be about right,” she said. “That would help. Now you just have to remember to say it.”

Now Arthur was smiling. “It’s just like a married couple, isn’t it?” he said to Molly.

She nodded. “They have their sore spots, their issues, and they know what they are, it’s just hard to change.”

“But they want to try, both of them. I admire that,” said Arthur. “A lot of married people don’t want to put that kind of effort into it.”

The students were looking at them in various degrees of surprise. “What, are you saying you think they’re going to end up married?” asked Ron.

The Weasley parents laughed. “No, that’s not what we mean,” said Molly. “What we mean is that the dynamic we’ve seen between them in the last few minutes is a common one for married couples. When you get married, or are in a relationship, you’re bound to rub each other the wrong way in some areas. It takes some work to discover what they are, and then you have to work out how to deal with it. Both people have to try pretty hard to change, or the stuff that upsets one of them keeps happening.”

“See, for example,” continued Arthur, “it upsets Harry when Pansy won’t forgive herself about her past, because he has, and he wants her to. He doesn’t want her to think that he blames her for anything.” Arthur looked at Harry, who nodded. “And it upsets Pansy when Harry suggests she come out in the open, because she feels like it means he doesn’t appreciate or take seriously what she does, which is very difficult. She feels like he’s saying, ‘if it’s too tough, then just quit,’ which is not what she means.” Pansy nodded. “So their natural tendencies—hers to criticize

herself, his to worry—affect the other in ways they didn't expect. So that has to be dealt with. And that's exactly how it is with married couples.”

“Also,” added Molly, “you two have a... comfort level, and an emotional intimacy, which usually takes longer than three months to develop. And I especially liked how Pansy picked up on Harry wanting to say what she's come to expect him to say, even though he didn't say it, and criticizing him anyway. That's very typical. I know I've done that to Arthur more than a few times.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about, darling,” he replied, and they laughed.

Pansy looked very impressed. “It's amazing how you put all that together so fast.”

“Just part of being married,” said Arthur modestly. “Well, being successfully married, anyway. Lots of couples don't try that hard, and they end up emotionally distant from each other.”

“Sounds like my parents,” she said sadly. “They're both kind of... overly formal people, don't show their feelings much. I can't imagine them trying to work out the psychology of what was going on, or try to understand what the other was thinking. They just don't work like that. It makes me feel kind of sad for them, actually.”

Arthur shrugged. “Different people are comfortable with different things. Maybe your parents are happy with how they've worked things out. It's just hard to know.”

“One thing I do know,” said Pansy, “is that they wouldn't have listened to Harry and I bicker and thought it was cute and explained the dynamic; they'd have told us to be quiet. They wouldn't have talked about something as sensitive as the Percy situation even to each other, never mind around other people. And they wouldn't be so friendly to someone they barely knew.”

Molly and Arthur smiled, touched. “Thank you, Pansy, that's so sweet,” said Molly. “First Harry's card, now this, I really am going to get embarrassed.”

“Harry’s card?” asked Pansy.

“Harry wrote cards for Ron, Mum, and I,” Ginny explained. “The ones to me and Mum were very nice, heartfelt, and the one to Ron was a classic. Ron, go get the card Harry gave you.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Why should I? He’s just having a go at me.”

“No, Ron,” Ginny explained patiently, “He’s expressing heartfelt sentiment and having a go at you, at the same time. It was brilliant. Now go get it, or I will.”

Ron groaned and started to get up from the table, but then had a thought. “Harry, you’re not subject to the underage restriction anymore. Just Summon it. It’s near my bed, with all my other Christmas stuff.”

Harry took out his wand, focused on the card, and silently Summoned it. It arrived in a few seconds, and he caught it and handed it to Ron. “No, you read it,” said Ron. “You’re the one who wrote it, so it makes more sense.”

Harry did so, and was rewarded with loud laughter from Pansy, Hermione, and Neville. “Oh, Ginny’s right, that is a classic. Keep that card, Ron,” chuckled Hermione.

“Oh, absolutely, Hermione, it’ll be one of my most treasured possessions,” said Ron sarcastically. Then, to Harry’s surprise, he turned to Harry and smiled. “I will admit, though, it was funny. Thanks for putting the effort into it.”

“Any time, Ron.”

“What’s this, Harry?” asked Hermione, pulling the paper out of the card. “Oh, it’s a gift certificate! That’s a good idea, Harry!”

“He didn’t get you one?” asked Ron. “Both Ginny and I got them.”

“Ron, this is a Muggle store, I can go there any time. He must’ve gotten them for you and Ginny so you could shop there. Were you going to go with them, Harry?”

“Yes, I was. You should come too. You’ve actually shopped in these places, whereas I’ve only seen them. You too, Neville, if you’re free.” He looked at Pansy, and his face fell. She smiled gamely.

“I know, Harry, you don’t have to say it. I can see how bad you feel, and I appreciate it. But you’re right. Much as I’d love to come along, even I recognize that it would be a huge and stupid risk. Tell you what, you just promise me that you’ll all do something like this with me after I’m out in the open. How about it?”

“Sure, Pansy,” said Ron, who also seemed to feel bad. The others nodded.

“Good, you can be sure I’ll remember this,” said Pansy.

Molly got up to start clearing away the dishes. Hermione tried to help, but Molly brushed her away.

“I’ll help her, Hermione,” said Arthur, “you all go on into the living room. Harry, you were going to use that boggart tonight?”

“Oh, yes, thank you, Arthur. Of course, I would have heard it thumping and remembered anyway. Thanks for letting it stay for a few days so I could use it.” He and the others went into the living room.

“So, why are you keeping a boggart here, Harry?” asked Neville.

“I wanted to practice on it. I was thinking about using one the same way Remus did when he taught us. I was also thinking about using it to help teach the Patronus Charm. See,” he said, now to Pansy, “When a boggart sees me, it becomes a dementor. I thought maybe I could open it, make sure I was the closest one to it, and then a student could try the Patronus Charm on it. That’s how I learned.”

“Not a bad idea, Harry,” said Hermione. “Of course, you’d have to keep a decent distance. It’s not going to be good if you faint, the students won’t be able to get rid of it.”

“Yeah, that’s why I thought I’d practice,” he agreed. “I want to make sure I can take care of it with no difficulty. I’m sure I can, though.”

“I’m sure, too, Harry, but I’ll stand by to grab Mum or Dad just in case,” said Ginny. Remember, the underage thing, none of us are allowed to do anything.”

He nodded. “Okay, now, stay a distance back from me. I’m going to open it.” He looked at the chest in the corner of the room, but didn’t come close to it. He waved his wand, and the door flew open.

A dementor did not come gliding toward him as he had expected. Instead, a body seemed to come flying out of the chest, landing a few feet away from Harry, who backed away reflexively. The body came to rest, face up.

It was Pansy, very clearly dead. The Pansy created by Harry's fears had not died easily. Her face was bruised in several places, and there was a gash in her chest, along with a fair amount of blood on her dress near the wound.

Harry gasped, and felt he could barely breathe. For a half of a second he thought it was the real Pansy, and was in shock. Then he turned and looked at the real Pansy, who was equally shocked, as were the rest. He looked back at the boggart, which was still in the form of the dead Pansy.

He staggered over to the sofa and sat down, tears starting to come up. It's not Pansy, he thought. It's just a boggart. Pansy is fine. But what he had seen, he could not dismiss easily. That could happen, he thought. He put his head in his hands.

Pansy walked over, looking mortified. She sat down next to him and looked into his eyes. She reached out and held him, and a few tears trickled down his cheeks. "Oh, Harry," she said. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry I ever criticized you for worrying, I'm so sorry..." She said it over and over again as she held him, his head buried in her shoulder.

He shook his head. "It's not your fault," he said. "It's just me, it's not your fault." He heard someone say "Riddikulus," and realized that Ginny must have called Molly.

"It is my fault," said Pansy, now near tears herself. "If I hadn't been so dismissive of your concern, maybe you wouldn't have worried so much. I'm sorry... I had no idea it was like this."

Harry shook his head, the tears stopping. "It's just a boggart," he said, as much to himself as to her. "I know you're going to be careful. Just me being stupid," he said, not wanting her to blame herself.

“It isn’t stupid, Harry,” said Molly gently, sitting on a chair near the sofa. “A person’s worst fear is never stupid. And Pansy, it wasn’t your fault,” she said. “Harry was going to worry, no matter what reassurances you gave him. Believe me, I know what it’s like to worry. He can’t help it, it’s just the situation you’re in.”

Harry took a few breaths, and looked up at the others. They looked stricken, imagining how it must have affected him. He looked at Pansy, and took her hands in his. “I know you want to do this,” he said. “I respect it and I appreciate it. I know it could save my life. It’s just hard for me not to think about that.”

“I understand,” she said. “I should have understood better... I guess I never really put myself in your shoes. I should have tried harder. I’m sorry, Harry...”

“It wasn’t your fault that the boggart—“

”I know that,” she said, sniffing. “I mean I’m sorry for not taking your concern that seriously. I just always thought, oh, he worries too much, I guess it’s just this thing he does. I didn’t realize it was like this, that this was what you saw... I just never thought about it, and I should have. That’s why I’m sorry. You can believe I’ll take your concern more seriously from now on.”

He nodded to indicate his appreciation. “I don’t know what I can do... not much I guess, since I don’t think I can stop worrying just like that. I’ll just try to keep in mind that you’re being careful.” Harry didn’t know how much good that would do, but he felt he had to recognize that just because he feared something didn’t mean it was going to happen.

Molly leaned forward, rearranged Harry’s hair affectionately, smiled at him, and kissed his forehead. She stood, then touched Pansy on the shoulder. “If you need anything, you let me know,” she said, and left the room.

“Ron, Ginny,” said Pansy. “I envy you two. She’s very nice.”

Ginny smiled, but Ron said, “You’ve never heard her yell.”

“Sure I have,” she said. “Second year, that Howler you got for taking the car.”

Now Ron smiled a little. “Oh, yeah.”

Hermione looked as if it had been an effort not to rush over and hug Harry for the past few minutes. She did so now, sitting where Molly had sat. “Poor Harry...” she said.

He looked at her appreciatively. “I’ll be all right.”

“I know,” she said, “but... it’s like what Dumbledore said, you have all these burdens, and this is one of them. I can only imagine what you felt when you woke up after the Diffusion and saw us in those beds, wondering if we’d ever get up. This really... brings that to life somehow.” She let go of him, looking at him with concern and sorrow.

Neville walked over to behind the sofa. He didn’t say anything, but leaned over and put a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

Harry looked up and said, “Thanks, Neville.”

Neville nodded and said, “Good thing you decided to practice first. Can you imagine if that had happened in front of a class?”

Harry shuddered at the thought. “It would have been bad, they would have had to get another teacher. Not to mention, Pansy’s cover would have been blown.” He shook his head. “Stupid of me not to assume it could change, I just thought it would be dementors forever. I didn’t think about the fact that I’m actually not that scared of them anymore, because I’m good at the Patronus Charm now. But even if I had to try to guess what it would be, I wouldn’t have guessed that. But it makes sense.”

Neville nodded. “I have no idea what mine would be now, but I have a feeling it wouldn’t be Snape anymore.”

Pansy laughed out loud. “I heard about that. I would have loved to have seen it.”

“It was very funny,” affirmed Ron. “Of course, Neville paid for it. Snape was really, really awful to him after that.”

“It wasn’t like it made that much difference,” said Neville. “He was always awful anyway.”

“It’s so strange,” said Hermione. “You two don’t have Potions anymore, so you don’t see it, but now, Snape treats Harry perfectly politely in class. No snide comments, no sneers, even. I think it’s as nicely as he’s capable of treating anybody. It has to be because Harry’s a teacher.”

“It could be that,” Harry agreed, thankful for the conversation to help get his mind off of the shape the boggart had assumed. “But I think it’s also possible that Dumbledore asked him to do it, or made him do it. He doesn’t have to treat me like a teacher when I’m in his class, but he does anyway.”

“In my class, he’s as nasty as ever,” said Ginny.

“I haven’t seen any change either,” added Pansy. “Of course, he always favors Slytherins, so I wouldn’t. He’s still pretty unpleasant with the Ravenclaws in our class.”

“That reminds me,” said Harry, “I think I forgot to tell you before, but before the year started, I actually called him on that.” He described what had happened at the teachers’ meeting.

“Good for you, Harry,” said Hermione. “Imagine that, him accusing you of singling out people. That’s a laugh.”

“Talk about the pot calling the cauldron black,” agreed Ron.

“Flitwick and Sprout were really pleased,” said Harry. “They both told me later that they appreciated it. They know how blatant he is, but there’s not much they can do.”

As they continued talking, everybody sat down, and the incident with the boggart gradually faded from their minds. They talked about school and exchanged Christmas-related experiences. After a few hours had gone by, during a lull in the conversation, Hermione looked at Neville. “Neville, could I talk to you for a minute?” Surprised, Neville nodded. “You can use my room,” said Ginny. “You know where it is, Hermione.” Hermione got up and left, followed by Neville.

No one said anything for a few seconds, until they were well out of range. Ginny exhaled. “I’m so nervous, and it isn’t even me.”

Harry nodded. "I know what you mean." He turned to Pansy. "See, what's going on, is—"

"I know what's going on, Harry. Hermione told me about this in the notebooks a few weeks ago."

"A few weeks ago?" Harry repeated in surprise. "We only found out a few days ago."

Pansy shrugged. "I think when you write to someone in a notebook like that, it's easier to say private stuff. You don't have to worry about being overheard. I really hope it goes all right too."

"Did she, um... tell you about how it came up that we found out?" asked Ron, clearly hoping to receive a negative answer.

Pansy smiled sympathetically. "Sorry, Ron. But she felt really bad about it, like she had invaded your privacy for no good reason."

"Yes, she feels bad for invading my privacy, so naturally she goes and tells another person."

Pansy looked at him earnestly. "Ron, I can be trusted. I'm not going to tell anyone, or make fun of you. I thought it was sweet that you worried about that. So did she, even though she felt bad."

"Pansy, it's not a question of whether I trust you," said Ron. "I do, just like they do. I just didn't even want to tell them. It's hard for me to talk about that kind of thing. Of course, she probably told you that, too."

"I did, too," said Ginny. Ron looked up in annoyance.

"Yes, you seem to be pretty well-known for it," said Pansy, smiling. "But I know how you feel. I was like that too, up until this year." She looked at them more seriously. "When I first came to talk to you in September, Harry, I was really nervous. Maybe as nervous as Hermione is right now. I wondered how I was going to convince you that I was genuine. I knew that I was going to have to... open up, in a way that I never really had before. It was hard, especially since I didn't know if you'd believe me. Since you were as understanding as you were—and I still thank you

for that—I've gotten a bit more used to opening up about things. Especially after that time I hid under the Cloak in your office. Did you tell them about that?"

Harry shook his head, and Pansy told Ron and Ginny what had happened. "So I just cried on Harry's shoulder, it was like my whole past came up to haunt me all at once. I had never told anybody stuff like I told Harry that day, and he was so good about it. I think that helped me get used to talking about stuff like that, that I wasn't going to be made fun of, or dismissed. But I really do know how you feel, Ron. Who knows, you might change too."

Ron's expression suggested that he wasn't thrilled at the idea, but he said, "Being around you lot, it wouldn't shock me. But that thing with Malfoy... he's so despicable, I feel bad for you just hearing about it." Harry and Ginny glanced at Ron in surprise, as it wasn't common for him to express sympathy like that. "I also get that you told me that kind of in return for what Hermione told you about me."

She nodded. "Yes, that's true. And thanks for your sympathy, but the fact is, I deserved it. When that happened, I didn't cry because he had contempt for me; I cried because I deserved that contempt, and I knew it. It was good that it happened, though. That cry helped me get most of it out of my system. I felt like all those years of being Malfoy's toady had... kind of poisoned me, and I had to get it out." She looked at Harry. "I wanted to say this when you were talking about Percy, but I didn't think it was my place. When you said what you said, that you could forgive him if he knew what he'd done and regretted it for the right reasons, I couldn't help but think of my situation. What you said you would do with Percy is exactly what you did with me."

"I'm sure Mum knows Harry meant it anyway, though," said Ginny. "To tell you the truth, though... and I'd never tell Mum this... but I don't care if he comes back or not. In some ways, I'd just as soon he didn't. He's very much the way you describe your parents to be, maybe even more so. He's just so... distant, even with family members."

“He’s a jerk, is the way I’d put it,” said Ron disgustedly. “I’m with Ginny, of course, I’d just as soon he didn’t come back either. But I suppose if he really was repentant, I’d agree to his coming back. I just don’t think it’s going to happen.”

The conversation turned to other things. After another half hour had passed, Ginny said, “I wonder how it’s going up there.”

“Well, I hope,” said Pansy. “I hope Neville’s smart enough to know how lucky he is.”

Ron chuckled, then looked embarrassed at Pansy’s inquiring glance. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to do that. It’s just... I’m not used to the idea that you’re that close with Hermione. I know you have the notebooks and everything, but...”

Pansy looked at him sadly. “Because of how I used to make fun of her?”

Ron nodded. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have laughed. I know that must be a hard topic.”

“My impulse is to say that I deserve it, which I do, but then Harry will get on my back, so I won’t.”

“Yet you did, anyway,” said Harry.

“Sort of. But I do understand, Ron, and I don’t think you were even thinking about the reason when you laughed. And yes, with the notebooks, I’ve discovered what a nice person Hermione is. She doesn’t seem that way when you see her in class, she’s so focused on knowing everything. And in person she can seem a bit bossy.” Harry and Ron exchanged a smile. “Yes, I see you’ve thought that too,” said Pansy. “But the things I like about her are the kind you don’t find out until you get to know her. Also, look at Neville. He’s the kind of boy that a lot of girls say they want, but really don’t. He’s kind and gentle, and he’ll be a great husband. They deserve each other.”

“Thank you, Pansy, that’s very nice of you to say,” said Hermione, as she walked into the room with Neville, holding hands with him. Neville looked overwhelmed. “I agree, of course.” She looked at Neville and smiled. She continued, “I know you all want a report... all I can say is that we’re going to spend

some of the day tomorrow together, and a few more times before vacation is over. But I've managed to convince Neville to give me a chance."

Now Neville looked very embarrassed. "Hermione, come on. It's more like the other way around."

The others all smiled, happy for them. "Scared, Neville?" asked Ron.

"Terrified," grinned Neville. "And very surprised. But very happy."

"Well, if you need advice, you can always ask my Mum and Dad," said Ron. "They seem to know a thing or two."

"Maybe we will," said Hermione. "So, what were you talking about while we were gone?"

"You, of course," said Pansy.

"I think the last thing was that Neville would make a great husband," added Ginny, smiling at Neville, who blushed even more than he already was.

Pansy smiled at Harry. "See, Harry, you're not the only one who's cute when he's embarrassed."

"I think I can't give an opinion on that," said Harry, straight-faced.

"This is what I get for saying what Tonks said about you," said Neville to Harry. "It didn't occur to me that anyone would say it about me."

"I wouldn't have thought so about me, either," Harry agreed. Realizing that for each of them the source of the embarrassment was having been complimented, he added, "We're being made fun of, but I suppose there are worse ways to be made fun of."

The next morning, Harry had to assure Molly repeatedly that he was all right, that the boggart experience was not still bothering him. Harry, Ron, and Ginny flew around outside for a while, and otherwise killed time until 1:15. Neville and Hermione came through the fireplace about five minutes late.

"Sorry we're late," said Neville. "My gran, you know..."

"We had lunch with her, at Neville's place," explained Hermione.

The others raised their eyebrows. "Bet that was fun," said Ron.

"I was a little worried," acknowledged Hermione, "but it wasn't that bad, really."

Neville agreed. "I was kind of worried too, I didn't know how she'd react to my bringing a girl home to meet her. I know better than anyone how she can be. But fortunately, she already had a high opinion of Hermione. She still acted strict, like she often does, but I knew she was pleased. Last night, when I told her what happened, she was really surprised. She told me some things, and they all kind of boiled down to the idea of, 'You've got something good, now don't mess it up.'" The others laughed.

"Excuse me, I have to use the bathroom before we go," said Hermione, and walked off.

"You have got something good, Neville," Harry said. "But somehow I don't think you're going to mess it up."

Neville looked at Harry seriously. "I still can't believe it, Harry, partly because... last night, I had a hard time falling asleep, so much was going on in my head. But one think I kept thinking was, 'she wants me, and not Harry?' It's just hard to get used to that idea."

"You'd better get used to it, Neville," said Harry, embarrassed. "First of all, you know how close Hermione and I are, and always will be. But I think we've both always known that it would never be romantic. I'm not sure why, but it's true. Secondly, there's no reason for her not to prefer you over me. You're..." He paused, uncomfortable with the idea of telling Neville what he thought were his good qualities. "Ginny, will you please tell him? It'd be better coming from you."

Ginny grinned at him wickedly for a second before turning to Neville. "What Harry wants to say, Neville... well, what he doesn't want to say, really... is that like Pansy said, you're kind and gentle. You're also not afraid to deal with emotions, which girls find very appealing. You're a good person, and Hermione was clever enough to see that. She got you while you were still available."

Neville was, of course, very embarrassed. “I think I feel like Harry felt with what his first years were saying in letters. My opinion of myself is so different from Hermione’s, and yours, that it’s taking a lot for me not to assume Hermione just feels sorry for me or something. I know that’s dumb, of course, but you see what I mean. You know how I used to be, part of me still sees myself that way.”

“Well, Hermione doesn’t,” warned Ginny, “and if you don’t stop, you’re going to really annoy her by putting yourself down too much. That’s not something that girls like, just so you know.”

“Yes, I guessed that from last night,” Neville said ruefully. “It took her almost a half hour to persuade me that I was good enough for her. I think she was getting impatient, but she managed.”

“You’ll be fine,” said Harry. “You know, we’re all really happy for you, for both of you.”

“Thanks, Harry. That means a lot to me.”

“So, what did you do this morning?” asked Ron.

“We just walked around Diagon Alley, visited the shops, nothing special. We talked a lot, and that was nice. Suddenly there seems to be a lot to talk about. We also visited your brothers’ shop,” he said to Ron and Ginny. “She told them about us, you should have seen their faces. It was pretty funny. They made a few jokes... I got the feeling that they wanted to make more than they did, but were being nice, for them.”

Hermione walked back in during his last sentence. “Yes, for them. I was annoyed, though, because they treated Neville more like he used to be instead of who he is now. They don’t know what he’s been like this year; if they did, they wouldn’t act like it was so strange. Not that he wasn’t good last year, too, but you know what I mean. Anyway, I think they stopped making jokes because they figured out that they were annoying me, more than they meant to, probably. Then they were more nice about it.”

“They mean well,” said Ginny. “You know them, making jokes is their main way of communicating.”

“Yes, I know,” said Hermione, her tone making clear what she thought of that. “If either of them ever wants a woman in their life, they’re going to have to change that.”

“I wouldn’t disagree with you,” said Ginny. “So, are we ready to go?”

“I think so,” said Harry. “Did you go to Gringotts earlier so Neville could exchange some Galleons for pounds?”

“No, I have pounds,” said Hermione, “so I can just trade directly with him.”

“And you can use some of my gift certificate, Neville,” Ginny offered.

“Yeah, mine too,” added Ron, with a sideways look at Harry. “I have a feeling it’ll be more than I need.”

Harry sighed, and tried not to roll his eyes. “I suppose I should be grateful that you didn’t complain. I was afraid you would.”

“I almost did,” said Ron. “I may not know the exact exchange rate, Harry, but I’m not a moron. I know a hundred pounds isn’t a small amount of money. But I decided to be nice to you, and not complain. I must have been overwhelmed by what you wrote in the card.” They all laughed.

“My first thought was to make it two hundred each,” said Harry. “It was only worrying about your reaction that made me take it down to one hundred.”

“Harry,” said Ginny, “next time, give him the one hundred and give me the two hundred. I’m not nearly so proud as he is.”

Harry chuckled. “I’ll keep that in mind, believe me.”

“Well, let’s get going, we can talk along the way,” suggested Hermione. They stepped through the fireplace one by one, and continued their conversation in Diagon Alley.

“Can I ask, what’s the problem with Harry giving you guys a gift certificate?” asked Neville. “I mean, he’s got lots of money, he can afford it.” Harry noticed that Neville and Hermione were holding hands.

“See, Neville,” answered Ginny, “our family has never had much money, and it can be hard to accept money and expensive things when you’re in that situation, because it makes you feel bad that you can’t reciprocate. Harry wouldn’t want us to feel like that, but it can be hard not to.”

“It’s all part of the wonderful lifestyle of not having money, Neville,” added Ron. “Even if somebody wants to be nice, it’s hard to accept it. I almost wish I didn’t feel this way, but I do.”

Neville nodded. “I guess I understand. My gran and I have never had that much money, but it’s always been enough. I’d probably be in your situation if I had six brothers and sisters.”

“Tell you what, Harry,” said Ron. “You can buy me a Firebolt if you really want to.”

Harry thought Ron was joking, but he wanted to be sure. He stopped and stared at Ron intently. “Would you really let me? Because if you say yes, we’ll go to Gringotts right now.” With his eyes, he tried to make sure Ron knew he was serious.

Ron’s eyes widened. “Of course, I was joking! Are you crazy? Do you know how much a Firebolt costs?”

“Six hundred and seventy Galleons,” Harry answered, deadly serious. “You shouldn’t joke about something you’d know I’d really like to do.”

Ron sighed in exasperation. “Harry, I know you have a fair bit of gold, but you do that a few times, and your vault will be down to nothing.”

“Ron, they pay me for teaching, remember? I have no expenses. I’m going to get three thousand, five hundred Galleons this year that I didn’t expect. Do you really think I’m going to miss six hundred and seventy that much? I would give the whole thing to your family if I thought they would let me.”

Ron looked flabbergasted, and Ginny and Neville looked surprised as well. “Three thousand five hundred for the year? That’s really good,” said Ginny.

“Actually, it’s four thousand two hundred, Harry,” corrected Hermione. “They pay you in the summer, too, even though you’re not teaching then.”

Ron was shaking his head. “Having money must give you an odd attitude about spending it.”

Harry gave Ron his most earnest look. “No, Ron, you know what gives me an odd attitude? Not having money, and then having it. The Dursleys never gave me a pound, even though they had plenty of money. Then I had plenty of money, and I knew I didn’t want to be like them, I wanted to do what I wished had been done for me. Remember the Hogwarts Express, first year? Do you know how happy it made me to be able to buy that stuff and share it with you? It really felt great.

“Look, I’m not saying I don’t understand your attitude about this. I can see why you would feel that way. But I wouldn’t feel like I was doing you a favor. I would feel like you were doing me a favor, letting me do something that would make me happy.”

Ron finally looked serious. “Harry, I can see you’re serious about this. It’s kind of amazing, really. And I do take your point, I can imagine myself feeling the way you do if I was in your position. I’m almost tempted. But the fact is, I just got a new broom last year, and I can’t imagine Mum being very happy when it was hard for them to buy me what they bought me, and then have it made irrelevant by a Firebolt. I’m sure you can understand that. Also, as a Keeper, a Firebolt would be pretty much wasted on me.”

“It wouldn’t only be for Quidditch, Ron,” Harry said. “But yes, I do see the point about your mother. She was really happy to buy you that broom when you were made a prefect. I didn’t think of that.” Harry felt frustrated.

To Harry’s surprise, Ron smiled a little. “That look on your face is kind of how I feel when I want to buy something but can’t. You want to and can’t, just for a different reason. And it was nice, what you said about your salary. Yes, they’d never take it, even though you’d want them to. They just wouldn’t be comfortable.”

Harry sighed again, and they continued walking. Then he turned to Ginny. “Ginny, any chance I can persuade you?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for the last few minutes,” she said, to his surprise, “because I knew you would ask me. I’m tempted as well. I don’t have any issues with Mum, since my broom’s a hand-me-down, and as a Chaser, it wouldn’t be wasted. But my problem is, it wouldn’t mean to me what it would mean to Ron. I don’t look at a Firebolt in Quality Quidditch Supplies with lust in my heart, like Ron does. It would be nice, but that would be about it. I promise you, Harry, that if it meant to me what it would mean to Ron, I would let you do it. But it just doesn’t.”

“Okay, I can see that,” Harry said. “But let me ask the two of you a question. Bill works for Gringotts. Suppose he came into a lot of money, let’s say, twenty thousand Galleons. If he wanted to give your parents five thousand so they could be more comfortable financially, would they take it?”

Ron and Ginny looked at each other, their faces indicating that neither was sure. Ginny said, “We don’t know, Harry. But I see where you’re going with this. If they would take it from Bill, they should take it from you.”

Harry nodded. “What it really comes down to is, am I truly a member of the family or not? Would they consider my children their grandchildren, but refuse to accept from me what they would accept from one of you? I’d like to know that.”

“I’d like to too, actually, Harry,” said Ginny. “It seems only fair. I’ll tell you what I’ll do. The next time I get Mum alone, I’ll ask her the Bill question, a nice, innocent what-if question. If she says no, or that they’d have to think about it, then she’s off the hook. But if she says yes, I’ll lower the boom on her. She’ll be upset, but it’s perfectly fair.”

“Is that really fair, to find out that way?” asked Neville. “Seems kind of tricky.”

“Where do you think Ginny got the idea to do that, Neville?” said Ron. “She’s done it to us, more than once, to convince us of something or other. Who knows, if she’s really on the ball, she could recognize Ginny’s question for the trap that it is.”

“No, she won’t, Ron,” said Ginny. “She won’t be expecting it. I don’t think she knows that Harry’s so keen to give away large amounts of gold.”

“Why are you so keen, Harry?” Neville wondered. “Why is it so important to you?”

Before Harry could answer, Hermione said, “I think I can answer that, and Harry can tell me if I’m wrong. You see, Neville, Harry has no real family, by which I mean, people who welcome him home and care about him. The Weasleys became that for him, and they’re very good people. And it wasn’t because he was Harry Potter, he knows that. Everybody—well, everybody except Percy—in the family has been very good to him, so he badly wants to do something for them, in gratitude. Gold seems like the perfect thing—Harry has more than he needs, and they don’t have as much as they’d like. He’d like it to make them happy, so it’s frustrating to him that it might make them as uncomfortable as it would happy. Does that about cover it, Harry?”

“I could hardly have said it better myself,” he answered, as they exited Diagon Alley and headed into Muggle London. “Hermione, you know how to get to this store, right?”

She nodded. “It’s just a few blocks away, I assume that’s why you picked it. Just follow me, it won’t take long.”

Ginny picked up the thread of the conversation. “Harry, of course, it’s extremely good of you to want to do that. But you know what, you made Mum very, very happy with that card. She’s mentioned it two or three times to me since Christmas, and of course I was there when she opened it. She’s also mentioned that you kiss her back now when she kisses you. I told her why, of course. But if you only do stuff like that, that’s more than enough. Even though she’d know that you’re sincere in your reasons for wanting to give it, she might be afraid it could somehow cause tensions later, and she wouldn’t want to risk that. She’s very happy with your affection.”

“The other thing,” Ron added, “is that in a way, it’s almost not necessary anymore. Ginny and I are the only two left, whereas there used to be as many as seven of us kids. That’s much less of a burden, and one way I noticed is that they gave us more pocket money than usual this year. So it’s already not like it was, and when Ginny and I leave, they’ll have far fewer expenses. They’ll say it’s not necessary.”

Harry was disappointed, but he could understand that, too. “Okay, but I still want Ginny to ask the Bill question. I really would give them as much gold as they’d take. I mean, I’m not even going to need what’s in my vault. Even if I don’t manage to become an Auror—“

“Are you kidding, Harry?” interrupted Neville. “They can’t wait to have you, didn’t you notice?” To the others, Neville said, “The way they talked about him, it was obvious that to them, the testing is a formality. They act like he’s one of them already.”

“You’re not being very understanding of my modesty problem, Neville,” Harry joked. “I hate to jinx it. Anyway, I was saying, even if I don’t become an Auror, I’m never going to have money problems, being Harry Potter. I’ll always be able to do something.”

“Yeah, that’s true, Harry,” agreed Ron. “You could charge for signing autographs!” Harry gave Ron a sour look.

“Actually, you could write a book,” suggested Hermione. “Even your life up until now is interesting enough that it would be a best-seller.”

“I never thought of that,” said Harry. “But you see my point. Nobody is ever going to worry whether I have enough gold, even if I give a lot of it away.”

“Sorry, Harry,” said Ginny. “Who knows, we could be wrong about what Mum and Dad will think. But it doesn’t seem likely. Even so, and I’m completely serious when I say this... just randomly give Mum a hug and a kiss for no reason, and ask her some questions about anything. Sit down with Dad and talk to him

about Muggle stuff, or his job. You'll make them happier than you would by giving them gold."

Harry didn't respond, because he knew it was true. He resolved to remember to do what she suggested a few times before going back to Hogwarts.

They entered the store and started looking around. Hermione and Ginny quickly became interested in clothes and shoes, which the boys had no interest at all in, so they decided to separate and meet in an hour. The boys walked and talked, taking long looks at nothing in particular. In the sporting goods department, Harry explained various Muggle sports to Ron and Neville. When the girls rejoined them, Ginny carrying a large and full bag, they went to the electronics department and looked around.

"Dad would go nuts in this kind of place," said Ron. "He'd spend all kinds of money, and then Mum would be annoyed at him because of the clutter."

"Hey, Ron, look at this," said Harry. He pointed to a small chessboard.

"Why is that in the electronics section?" asked Ron.

"It's a chess-playing computer," Harry replied. "See, it has sensors on each square, they can tell when you've moved and what you did. Or you can input the moves manually on the keypad. Do you know what the notation is... oh, wait a minute, it's on the board. Okay, I'll type in, d2d4. See, instantly, it answers g8f6. I've seen you do that more than once, I never know what to do after that."

"Usually, you should play c2c4," Ron said. "Then I imagine the computer, if it's smart, will play g7g6." Harry entered in White's move, and the computer responded as Ron had predicted. "Okay, now g1f3," Ron said, speaking to himself more than to Harry, who was amused to see Ron getting so interested. Hermione and the others had walked over. "Could this thing actually beat me?" Ron asked.

Hermione chuckled. "Ron, Muggle computers can beat the best chess players in the world. This won't be one of those computers, but I'm pretty sure it can beat you."

A salesman had walked by and heard their conversation. “Do you play tournament chess, sir?” he asked Ron. “Do you have a rating?”

Ron shook his head. “No, but I’m pretty good. No one at my school can beat me.”

“Well, this computer’s tournament-regulation setting has an equivalent FIDE rating of twenty-two hundred, which is a strong master level. A master will typically have spent at least several hundred hours studying, and played two to three hundred tournament games,” the salesman explained.

“And this thing plays as well as someone who’s done that?” Ron asked, impressed. The salesman nodded. “And can it use batteries? The same type as a compact disc player?” Receiving affirmative answers, Ron made his decision. “Okay... oh, wait a minute, how much is it?”

Hermione gestured to the price tag. “Ninety-nine pounds,” she read.

“Perfect! Good, I’ll take it,” Ron said. He started to pick up the board.

“Not this one, Ron,” murmured Hermione, embarrassed at Ron’s faux pas. “This is the display model, they have other ones down below. Here, give me your certificate and let me finish the purchase. You go on with this game, let’s see how you do.”

Ron continued playing the game he had started. The salesman took a new computer from below the counter, and Hermione gestured for Harry to walk with her to the register. She whispered in case her voice carried. “I realized that Ron doesn’t know about VAT,” she said. “I was afraid that if he found out—“

”He wouldn’t get it, because he’d need more money and wouldn’t want to ask,” Harry finished for her. “Good idea. Should I—“

”No, let me do it, it won’t be that much. I like the idea that I helped him buy it too, even if he won’t know.” Hermione paid for it, using the certificate and her own money to pay for the tax. The box was put into a bag, which Hermione took over to Ron.

“Look at this, I’m winning,” said Ron. He was two pawns ahead of the computer, and had a dominant position. “I thought I wasn’t supposed to be able to win.”

“This is the weakest setting, Ron,” Hermione explained. “The display model would naturally be at the weakest setting, so customers wouldn’t be intimidated by losing so badly. Of course, even at the weak setting, it’s still going to beat a lot of people who don’t know much about chess.”

“I see, that makes sense,” said Ron, accepting the bag that Hermione handed over. Harry noticed that she didn’t give him the receipt. She also handed him a one-pound note, as she knew that would be the change if there had been no tax. “Well, I don’t need to finish, I know I’d win. Let’s go look around some more. Ginny, did you spend your whole certificate?”

She nodded. “All here in this bag. Shoes, pants, blouses, and other things you wouldn’t care about.”

“I believe that,” Ron agreed. They walked away from the electronics department. “Should we go, or does anybody want to look around some more?” They realized there were several areas of potential interest they hadn’t been to, and decided to stay.

As they walked, they talked, but Harry suddenly had a strange feeling, as though something was wrong, but he couldn’t identify it. It became stronger, and he suddenly realized what it was: it was very similar to what he’d felt when the Cruciatus Curse had been tested on him, just before the spell had been delivered.

He felt a burst of adrenaline, and his reflexes kicked in. “Get down!” he yelled, grabbing the two nearest people, Hermione and Neville, pushing them to the ground as he went down. Just as he said the words, he heard two voices saying, “Avada Kedavra!” The green bolts, aimed at Harry, just missed him and the others, going over their heads. Ron and Ginny were slower getting down, but weren’t in the line of fire.

Lying on his side, Harry whipped out his wand, and Apparated to a spot behind the two who had fired the curses. He immediately put down an anti-Disapparation field, followed by two Stunning spells. The spells had no effect; they had not seen Harry, but they must have had the Protection Charm up just in case, Harry thought. He now saw Neville, on the other side of the attackers and using a counter as a shield, wield his wand, and ropes formed and whirled around the two. One immediately broke out of the ropes, and used his wand to free the other.

While they were doing so, Harry looked around for things to throw, and found four solid-looking metal objects. He waved his wand, and all four flew at high speed toward the two attackers. Harry had hoped they would not be expecting such a crude attack, and he was right; two objects hit each attacker's head, and they went down in a heap. Neville quickly Summoned their wands and wrapped them in ropes again.

Getting to his feet and looking around, Harry saw Tonks and Winston Clark run up to him. "Are there any others?" he asked.

"One," said Tonks. "Ron and Hermione were firing at him, but he Disapparated, he's gone. If there are any others, we don't know about them." Harry saw other Aurors Apparate, casting spells over wide areas that calmed down the frightened shoppers.

"Okay, it's secure, we just have to put it right, start doing Memory Charms," said Clark. "We want to get you all to safety. We'll assist the others. Harry, Apparate to Arthur Weasley's office; you know where it is, and it's close to ours. Go with him to the Auror offices, the others'll be there very soon."

"But the others are fine, right?" Harry asked.

"Yes, they're fine," yelled Tonks impatiently. "Now go!"

Instantly, Harry was standing next to Arthur Weasley's desk at the Ministry of Magic. Arthur, sitting at his desk, immediately stood. "Harry! I heard the alarms, but I didn't know what it was. It was you?"

“Yes,” Harry said, still not having had much time to think. “We were attacked in a Muggle department store. Aurors are there, they say everyone’s fine. Clark said you and I should go to the Aurors’ offices. That’s where they’re taking the others.”

Arthur broke into a run, and Harry followed. In a very short time, they were in a large room. An Auror Apparated in, holding Ron by both shoulders; the others were already there. Hermione was hugging Neville.

“Everyone’s fine, Arthur,” said Clark. “You might want to go to the scene, they’ll need lots of people doing Memory Charms. It was pretty crowded.”

“Okay, but I’m going to stop at home first, tell Molly to come in. She’ll want to be here.” He Disapparated. Kingsley Shacklebolt Apparated in and approached Harry. “I’d like you five to join me in that interview room,” he said, indicating a nearby empty room. “Dumbledore’ll be here in a— oh, there he is.” Dumbledore had just Apparated into the room. Harry and the others walked in, and were greeted by Dumbledore.

“Harry, I am very glad you and the others are all right,” said Dumbledore gravely.

Harry nodded. “It just now happened, I’ve barely had a chance to think.”

“We need to get a memory from someone,” said Kingsley. “Who should it be?”

“Harry has used the Pensieve before,” said Dumbledore. “If you would, Harry.”

Using his wand, Harry extracted the memory. “You need not join us,” said Dumbledore. “You should relax. We will be back in a moment.” Dumbledore and Kingsley entered the Pensieve.

Harry looked at the others. “You’re about to apologize, aren’t you,” said Hermione. “I’ve seen that look, I can tell. You know we accept the risk.”

He shook his head. “Yes, just being in public with me puts you at risk,” he said disgustedly. “And people wonder why I don’t want a girlfriend...”

The others looked at him with sympathy. “Really, Harry, it’s all right,” said Neville. “I know you don’t like it, but we want to be around when something like that happens.” The others said nothing, but their agreement with Neville’s statement was clear on their faces. Harry looked down, frustrated. All he could think of was how close his friends had come to being killed, again. He imagined what he would be feeling if one of them had.

Molly Weasley ran into the room, and one by one hugged everyone, including a surprised Neville, Harry last. “Oh, thank goodness you’re all all right,” she said fervently.

“Molly, I should leave the Burrow and go back to Hogwarts,” said Harry, despondent. “I’m too dangerous, I—“

”Oh, stop that,” said Molly impatiently. “Of course you’re staying. You don’t think Dumbledore’s helped arrange security at the Burrow? Why do you think they waited to attack you until you were in public?”

“That reminds me, I thought I was always being followed,” said Harry. “What happened with that?”

Dumbledore and Kingsley had just returned from the Pensieve; Kingsley immediately Disapparated. “You were, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “It was the one following you who alerted the Aurors. Everything happened so quickly that there was almost nothing for the Aurors to do once they arrived. You and Neville had taken care of the two that are now in custody, and the other had already escaped. The time from when they shot Killing Curses at you to when you incapacitated them was six seconds.

“Molly, if you or anyone else would like to view Harry’s memory of the attack, you may do so now, before Harry puts the memories back.” She wanted to, and so did all the others. Harry decided to join them. They watched it twice, after which Harry felt he more or less understood all that had happened. They exited the Pensieve, and Harry put his memories back.

Neville spoke first. “The Aurors told us that usually before a Death Eater will do a Killing Curse, they’ll put up an anti-Disapparation field so the person can’t get away. Why didn’t they do that before attacking Harry?”

“They did, Neville,” said Dumbledore. “Harry simply defeated it. Then as soon as he Apparated, he put a field on them. Just before you distracted them with the ropes, I saw both try to Disapparate, and fail.”

“So... that means Harry’s a stronger wizard than either of them?”
Dumbledore nodded. The others looked impressed, but Harry was still in no mood to be impressed with himself. As he had in the infirmary after Hogsmeade, Harry stood up and kicked the wall. It made him feel no better this time than it had then.

“Harry,” said Dumbledore in the same calm that had made Harry angrier after Sirius’s death, “I know that you are angry because your friends were put at risk. But they were exactly where they chose to be, where they would wish to be.”

In his anger, Harry did what he had told himself he would not do. Raising his voice, he asked, “And that’s why you taught them the Diffusion, too, right? Because they would want you to? Are the Aurors right, that you taught it just so it could be used to save me?”

Still calm, Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, Harry. That was why. I make no apologies for it. You must be kept safe, and for reasons greater than my own personal wishes. You know this, and so do your friends. They wish to—“

”I don’t care what they wish! I want them to stay alive!” Harry yelled. Realizing that he was on the verge of acting as he had in Dumbledore’s office in June, Harry stopped talking, still furious.

Ron got up and walked over to him. “Harry, get a grip, will you? Do you really want to be yelling at him? You have to get over this! Do you think we’re stupid, that we can’t decide what we want? We’ve always done this! Why should now be any different?”

“SIRIUS IS DEAD!” Harry screamed, losing control momentarily. Then he got it back, and saw Ron’s shocked expression. He felt like he desperately needed

Ron to understand this. “He’s dead, he’s never coming back, and I’m terrified that it could be any of you next...” He started sobbing, unable to say any more. So absorbed in his misery was Harry that he didn’t think to be surprised when Ron stepped forward and lightly held Harry, Harry’s head on Ron’s shoulder. Harry cried for about a half a minute, after which Ron guided him back into his chair.

Harry breathed deeply and looked up at Ron. “It was only Pansy because she’s the one in the most danger,” he said, struggling to keep control. “It could have been any of you.”

“We know, Harry,” said Ron. “We know. But we can’t do anything else, you know that. Put yourself in our position. You’d do exactly what we’re doing. We’re risking ourselves for you, and you’re risking yourself for all of wizarding society. Don’t blame us for following your example. How would you feel if we tried to get you to knuckle under to Voldemort, to keep you from danger? And do you think we don’t worry about you?”

Ron paused, then continued. “I’m sorry, Harry, I forgot about Sirius when I asked what was different. That was stupid, and I can see how it would affect how you see this. But you know I’m right.”

Harry slowly gained some control over his feelings. “Yes, I know you are. That’s the worst thing about this. I just can’t help how I feel. It’s kind of like Hogsmeade.” He paused. “The great Harry Potter,” he said bitterly. “Stronger than these two Death Eaters, strong enough to drive Voldemort off... but not strong enough not to have a fit because his friends are in danger. It should say that on my card.”

There was another silence. Then Dumbledore said, “If it did, Harry, it would be nothing to be ashamed of. This is your burden. We have seen how much you love, so it is not surprising that you would react this way. Your friends will support you in this way, as they will when you are under attack. You will get through it with their help.”

He looked up at them, and it was easy to see that they agreed with Dumbledore. Ginny stood, walked over, and pulled at Harry to get him to stand up. He couldn't help but smile, a very small one, at what she was doing. He allowed himself to be pulled up, and she hugged him. He held her, and tried to not think about his fears. Dumbledore's right, he thought. I'll get through this with their help. I just pray they'll all be there at the end.

Finally, he let go of Ginny. He looked at her, Ron, Hermione, and Neville. "Thank you," he said.

Ginny pulled her chair over next to Harry's, sat down, and held his hand. She looked at him as if daring him to comment. He gave her a look that he hoped conveyed his appreciation.

"Harry," asked Hermione, "I saw from your memory that you pulled us down and yelled at exactly the same time the Death Eaters said the incantations. But you didn't see them. How did you know?"

"I was wondering about that myself," added Molly.

Harry shook his head. "I can't even say for sure, but whatever it is, it's the same thing that let me block those Cruciatu s Curses blindfolded. It's just a feeling, something that seems wrong. I didn't even know for sure what it was, but it was enough like it felt with the Cruciatu s Curse to know it was serious. I just reacted, didn't think."

"Is this common?" Molly asked Dumbledore. "I've never heard of it."

"It is rare," replied Dumbledore. "It is something I experience to a certain degree. Voldemort has been reputed to as well, more strongly. One reason he is so strong is that it seems that he can know what spell is coming before it does, and so more easily prepare and defend. My guess is that this ability, along with being a Parselmouth and perhaps more, was passed along to Harry by the curse."

"But then, why am I only noticing it now?" Harry asked. "If I've had it all along?"

“It is a very subtle ability, easy to miss,” explained Dumbledore. “You noticed it because you were subjected to the Cruciatus Curse for five nights in a row, and you were in a more focused state. In general, the stronger a spell it is, the more easily you will notice it. The trial with Voldemort caused you to become aware of it, and this caused you to notice it more consciously in the demonstration with Professor Snape. That is why, the next day, you knew you would be able to block the Curse blindfolded, but were unable to satisfactorily explain why. In this case, the feeling was even stronger, I suspect, because the curse involved was a Killing Curse. This ability saved not only your life, but Neville’s as well. One of the curses was poorly aimed, and would have just missed you and hit Neville. I hesitate to tell you this, for obvious reasons, but it is the truth.”

“Harry,” said Neville earnestly, “whatever you do, don’t–“

Harry nodded. “It’s okay, Neville, I’m done with my fit.”

“It wasn’t a fit, Harry,” said Hermione sternly. “It was a very understandable emotional reaction.”

Harry smiled a little, still looking at Neville. “I’m done with my very understandable emotional reaction, Neville, so don’t worry.”

Neville nodded his acknowledgment. “And thank you for pulling us down.”

“Yes, thank you, Harry,” Hermione agreed.

“There is something else related to this topic I do not want to neglect to mention, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “You reacted in time to save yourself and Neville from the curses, but you noticed something a short time prior to that, did you not?”

“Yes, I just felt like something was wrong, but I didn’t know what it was. It was very vague. It was... maybe four or five seconds before the curses.”

“That was my impression as well,” Dumbledore agreed. “I saw your face. One moment it was normal, then suddenly it was very unsettled. What you were noticing was the anti-Disapparation field they had put up. You started looking

unsettled a few seconds before it was deployed; you simply did not know why. I wanted to inform you of that so you might recognize it in the future.”

He nodded and sighed. “I have a feeling I’m going to have plenty of opportunity.”

“Unfortunately so,” said Dumbledore. “In any case, we should work on refining this skill after vacation. It is clearly a very valuable one. And speaking of skills, yours seem to be improving by leaps and bounds. Kingsley just said, ‘if he gets much better, there’s not going to be much we can do for him that he can’t do for himself.’ The fact that there was little for the Aurors to do once they got there was a good indication of that..”

“It would have been very different if they hadn’t gotten permission for me to Apparate.”

“Yes, and if you had not become so quickly adept at what they taught you. Not everybody can move four objects simultaneously, so quickly, as you did. I know your time is very limited as it is, but I think you may wish to consider having regular Saturday training sessions with the Aurors. What you accomplished in three days with them was obvious in what you did today. Even now, you are clearly not an easy mark for Death Eaters. With further training once a week, it will not be long before you are a match for any of them, and not a pushover for Voldemort.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do,” Harry said, determined. “Will they do that?”

Dumbledore allowed himself a small smile. “I have been consulting with them over the past few days. Even before today’s events, they were proposing such an idea. They were most impressed with your progress over the three days, and so are happy to spend their own time on this. The fact that you may be critical to our cause also motivates them, but they would not spend the time if they felt it would be wasted. They also wished me, if I suggested it to you, to extend the invitation to Neville. They were quite impressed with him as well.”

Harry looked at Neville, whose face had lit up. “How about it, Neville?”

“Obviously, I want to,” said Neville fervently. “But what about the others?”

Harry wondered if Neville was thinking particularly of Ron, or Hermione, or all three. Clearly wanting to make up for his behavior on the night Harry returned from the Aurors, Ron spoke. "Neville, you're both special cases. You're really good at dueling, and the son of two Aurors, which is important to them... and Harry is, well, Harry. They can't be taking everyone's friends. Don't worry about it."

Hermione touched Neville's arm. "It's okay, Neville. You and Harry can teach us what you learn."

Harry wondered where he would get the time, and Neville looked amazed at the notion of teaching anyone anything, but neither argued. "Thank you," said Neville, to Hermione and Ron.

"I will make arrangements with them, then," said Dumbledore. He stood up. "I should be getting along. I will let you know when arrangements are finalized with the Aurors. Tomorrow being Saturday, it is possible they may be interested in a session then. If so, I will let you know soon."

"Sir," Harry said quickly, before Dumbledore could leave. "I want to apologize for what I said about the Diffusion Shield. I meant to ask you about it, but I didn't mean to accuse you about it."

"Thank you, Harry, though I did not take offense," said Dumbledore. Harry wondered what it would take for Dumbledore to take offense. "It was a valid question, and understandable under the circumstances. I know that you are referring to your tone, and again, that is understandable." He walked to the door, stopping to pat Harry on the shoulder. "Molly, I will be in touch," he said, and left.

"Okay, let's get back to the Burrow, no point in lingering here," said Molly, getting up. Ron and Ginny picked up their bags from the shopping expedition. "There's a fireplace a short walk away. Hermione, Neville, are you coming back with us, or going to your homes?"

"We'll come back, at least for a bit," said Hermione, as Neville nodded. They followed Molly out of the room.

Fifteen minutes later, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville were sitting in the Weasleys' living room, eating cookies and drinking butterbeer provided by Molly. "I guess when you almost get killed, you get to eat bad stuff before dinner," commented Ginny. Fawkes had joined Harry.

Ron was already playing the chess computer, after getting some help getting started. "There's a manual, you know, Ron," Hermione had said, but only halfheartedly, knowing he would not read it unless he absolutely had to.

"Well, that was quite an eventful first day as a couple for you two," Harry said to Hermione and Neville. They were on the sofa, and Hermione had her arm around Neville, who looked happy but embarrassed, as if he were doing something wrong.

"It was certainly memorable," agreed Hermione. "Nothing like mortal peril to make you feel closer. Funny, it makes me more glad that I was brave enough to do this. What happened today makes me feel like you have to live life while you can. Or as a famous Muggle said, 'eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.'"

"I'm sure he was invited to a lot of parties, with that attitude," said Ron, not looking up from the chessboard.

"You know what it means, Ron, or at least you would if your head wasn't buried in that thing," chastised Hermione.

"I know what it means," replied Ron, still not looking up. Harry suspected that now it was deliberate. "I know it doesn't mean literally tomorrow. I'm just saying, it's kind of morbid."

"I see your point, Ron," said Harry, "but for some reason, it especially makes sense to me right now. It just seems kind of hard to be merry right now."

Ginny smiled. "We could get Tonks in here, Harry, I'm sure she'd have a few ideas."

"I bet she would," Harry agreed. "Say, Neville, are you going to be reporting to Hermione every time Tonks has fun with me on Saturdays?"

Neville looked at Hermione, then back to Harry. With a straight face, Neville said, "I think Hermione's going to be mad at me if I don't. You wouldn't want to be responsible for that, would you?"

Harry chuckled. "Of course not, Neville. I have a feeling that soon, I'll be looking back fondly on the days when you were too afraid to make fun of me."

Now Neville smiled. "No you won't, Harry. I think you like me better this way."

Harry nodded. "You're right, I do. And Ron... thank you, for earlier."

Now Ron did look up from the chessboard. "No problem, mate. In that kind of situation, you're allowed to go off your nut a bit."

"That wasn't exactly what I meant."

"I know what you meant," Ron said. "What can I say... I felt awful for you, which you probably noticed. Dumbledore says it's a huge burden, which especially after today, I can see a bit better. I'm almost amazed you don't have a fit like that once a week or so. I mean, I worry about you sometimes, about all of you, wondering, what if something happened. But at least I don't have to feel responsible for anyone but myself. You're not really responsible for us, of course, but I do see why you could feel that way. But just try and stop us, you'll find out how non-responsible you are."

"He's right, Harry," said Hermione. "We all love you, and you're stuck with that."

"You got that from a greeting card, didn't you, Hermione," said Ron, deadpan.

Harry, Neville, and Ginny chuckled. Hermione looked at Ron disapprovingly. "You can be sincere and nice with Harry, but all I get is smart remarks?"

"Tell you what, Hermione... you go through what Harry goes through, and I'll be as sincere and heartfelt as you want."

Hermione looked disappointed. “That’s fair enough, I guess. But it would be nice if you could do it sometimes, just for no reason. You’re going to have to learn, if you want a halfway decent woman in the future.”

“Learn what, dear?” asked Molly, just having entered the room to put some things away.

“Ron, to be sincere and heartfelt, at least sometimes,” explained Hermione.

“Oh, he can, Hermione,” said Molly. “Not only today, I’ve seen him do it. I know he’ll manage when the time comes.”

“Thank you, Mum,” said Ron. “I think.”

Harry suddenly remembered what Ginny had said earlier. He got up, walked over to Molly, and hugged and kissed her. Delighted, she looked at him. “Harry! What brought this on?”

“No reason,” Harry said, happy at her reaction. “It’s just that I haven’t done that as much as I should, for a few years. I just wasn’t in the habit. So I want to make up for it now.”

Molly beamed at him. “Aren’t you sweet,” she said fondly. “I know you don’t want a girlfriend now, dear, but someday, some girl will be very, very lucky to get you.” Still smiling, she left the room.

Harry turned to Ginny. “As long as I keep getting good advice, anyway.”

She gave him a serious look. “Here’s some more good advice, Harry: Keep focusing on love, especially in crisis situations, but as much as you can. That’s how you’ll stay alive, and help us stay alive.”

He nodded. Anything I can do to keep the rest of you alive, I will, he thought. He found himself looking forward to more Auror training sessions. He pet Fawkes, and hoped there would be one tomorrow.

Harry found out the next day that the Aurors didn’t plan to have the next session for a few days, so he would have plenty of time to hang around the Burrow and do whatever he wanted in the meantime. It occurred to him that the only times

he had ever had that kind of freedom outside the oppressive environment of the Dursleys' home had been in the summers before his second and fourth years at Hogwarts, when he had stayed at the Burrow at the end of summer. The thought made him think of the Burrow even more as his home than he already did.

He spent an hour the next morning talking to Molly, who left at ten-thirty to go shopping. She asked Ginny if she wanted to come along; Ginny declined, and Harry noticed that Molly didn't ask him, though she glanced at him in a way that suggested that she wanted to, but had thought better of it. He knew the reason was the security issue, which brought his mood down. Not that he would have especially wanted to go anyway—he wouldn't have, he knew—but it was just the idea that he couldn't go anywhere in public without putting everyone around him at risk. Molly left through the fireplace, saying she'd be back in a few hours.

Harry and Ginny were downstairs; Ron was upstairs in his room, absorbed in playing his chess computer. Harry walked to the living room window and looked outside. It was raining steadily, and had been since he'd woken up. His mood was further dampened, as he'd felt like going for a fly all morning, and especially right then. He walked to the sofa and sat, and a few seconds after he did, Fawkes materialized and fluttered down, standing on his lap. He couldn't help but smile a little as he felt Fawkes's calming influence affect him, though he was still unhappy.

"Does he usually do that when you're depressed?" asked Ginny, from the other end of the sofa.

"Not always, but yes, a lot of the time," agreed Harry, as he gently pet Fawkes's feathers. "How did you know I was depressed, anyway?"

She chuckled; he got the feeling that it was because she thought he was being dense. "It's all over your face. I'm not Hugo, but I can read moods fairly well. I'd be able to tell even if it was a lot less obvious than this. You're thinking about yesterday, aren't you." Despite the words, her tone made it a statement, not a question.

He sighed. "Shouldn't I be?"

She nodded sympathetically. "It's not a question of should or shouldn't. It's really understandable that you would." She paused for a few seconds, then continued, "Last night, before I went to sleep, I was thinking about what it would be like to be you, to be in your position. Anytime you go someplace that isn't totally secure, you have to worry about your friends being killed, or innocent people being killed. I was trying to imagine what that would feel like."

He didn't particularly feel like talking about it, but he appreciated her effort to see things from his point of view. "Bet it wasn't fun."

"No," she agreed. "It kept me up for another hour past when I usually fall asleep." Looking at his expression, she added, "You know, I don't mean to depress you more by talking about it. I just want you to know that I understand what you're going through. Or, I'm trying to, anyway."

"Thanks, I appreciate it," he said. "I must be pretty bad off, if both you and Fawkes can't get me out of feeling depressed."

"Well, we should do something that'll distract you, then," she suggested. "I saw you looking out the window. I'd love a fly also, too bad about the weather. I know, why don't you teach me dueling, get me started on what Dumbledore and the Aurors have taught you."

"But you couldn't practice what I taught you, because of the underage thing," he pointed out.

She shrugged. "It's no problem, Mum's not here."

He did a double-take. "It's against the law!"

She chuckled knowingly. "Well, yes and no." Seeing his blank expression, she explained. "A lot of families don't pay attention to the underage magic law, and from talking to people at Hogwarts, I've found out that it's pretty well understood that the Ministry knows that, that they only take it seriously in certain situations, like when Muggles are likely to be involved."

"I mean, look at what happened with you, the first time Dobby visited you. You got a warning for the Hover Charm that he did. What that means is that the

Ministry magic detectors knew that magic was done, but they didn't know who did it. They assumed it was you, since it happened in a home where you were the only wizard. So, think about it. If they can't tell who did the magic, how could they possibly use the magic detection to enforce the underage law, in a home with a whole family of wizards? They can't, and they don't try. We don't do underage magic around here mainly because Mum and Dad don't want us to, but really it's more because it's their rule than because it's against the law. They haven't said that, but I've figured it out."

"If they can't enforce it most of the time, then why have the law at all?" wondered Harry.

"One reason, I think, is so parents can threaten their kids with it, tell them it's against the law and they could get caught," said Ginny. "That doesn't work for very long, though, since most kids start doing magic when they're alone, and nobody from the Ministry comes charging in. Another reason is the Muggle angle; they don't want Muggle-born wizards doing magic in their Muggle homes, mainly because of the possibility that it could be noticed by someone outside the family, and then they have to come in and do Memory Charms. The law is really a little unfair to the Muggle-borns, since it mostly only applies to them. The only other reason I can think of is to stop kids from doing magic in public, where they could annoy people, or do accidental damage.

"Anyway, Harry... believe me, lots of magic has been done in this house that Mum and Dad didn't know about, and the only way they ever found out was if the results were really obvious, like things getting broken. Who knows, Mum might not even object if you asked her, since the more Ron and I can defend ourselves right now, the better. I just don't see the point in bothering. She'd be reluctant to break the law, even an unenforceable one."

Harry slowly nodded. "I guess that makes sense, I hadn't thought of it that way before. It's kind of annoying, considering all the trouble I got in last year, just for using it to defend myself. Bad enough that they use a law against me unfairly,

but especially one that a lot of people break anyway.” He thought for a few seconds. “Okay, sure, I’ll teach you. I just hope your mother doesn’t come home and see us.”

“You could explain it to her anyway, but she won’t,” Ginny assured him. He spent the next hour teaching her the basics he’d learned from Dumbledore, and started her on what the Aurors had taught him. They stopped at noon to have sandwiches for lunch. Ginny suggested they make an extra one for Ron, and she took it upstairs. “He thanked me, but he barely looked up,” Ginny reported with amusement upon returning to the kitchen.

They chatted as they ate the sandwiches and potato chips, and Harry found that he was feeling better than he had. After they finished eating, they walked over to the living room window and looked out. Rain was still falling, as heavily as ever. They exchanged a look of disappointment, then Ginny’s face lit up. “I just thought of something. It might not be raining at Hogwarts, it’s pretty far away. We could fly over the pitch there, Fawkes could take us!”

Harry hesitated. “I guess he could... I’d love to, but I’m not sure I want to ask him, for something like—” He stopped speaking, then smiled. “It’s funny... I’m getting a feeling, like he wouldn’t mind. Normally, I wouldn’t know if that was my idea or his; a lot of times it’s hard to tell. But I’m also getting an image, of the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch. I’m pretty sure he’s telling me that it’s cloudy, but not raining there, and that he doesn’t mind taking us there at all. So, yes, I’d love to. We should ask Ron if he wants to come.”

“I’ll ask him, I’ll go up to get my broom,” said Ginny, as Harry Summoned his. She came back a minute later and said, “He says, maybe later. He’s really involved with that thing.” Harry nodded, happy that the gift certificate had led to Ron finding something he enjoyed so much, which he never would have found otherwise. Fawkes appeared, and Harry put an arm around Ginny and grabbed Fawkes’s tail.

They flew for a half hour, then Ginny wanted to do some Chaser practice, so they got a Quaffle from the Quidditch supply shed. Harry acted as a Keeper, and

Ginny would fly at him and try to shoot past him. After a half hour of that, they decided to rest, and flew over to the stands and sat on a bench.

“You were getting pretty good there, at the end,” she said. “You wouldn’t be a bad Keeper.”

“Thanks,” he replied. “Never tried it before, it takes a little bit to get used to.”

“Well, you have great reflexes, that’s bound to help,” she observed. “We should do this with Ron; he could Keep, and you could defend. It’d be good practice for me, a real challenge.”

“I’d be happy to,” he said. “But I’m not a Chaser either, of course, so I wouldn’t be able to—“

”You’ll do fine, trust me,” she assured him. “Especially on the Firebolt, I’ll have to work hard to get past you.”

Harry nodded, and looked up at the sky, then over at the castle. As he had at the Burrow, he felt at home, as though he was somewhere he belonged. “You look like you feel kind of better than you did before,” she said.

He nodded again. “I guess you were right about needing to be distracted. Thanks.”

Smiling, she moved closer to him and put an arm around his waist; he reflexively put his arm around her shoulder in response. “I’m happy to do it,” she said.

They sat in silence, and he looked around more. He saw Hagrid’s hut, and wondered if Hagrid was there, or in the forest talking to Grawp. That made him think of the centaurs, then of Firenze, about whom he’d heard nothing since the year had started. He wondered what Firenze was doing, since he hadn’t been teaching Divination; probably something secret for Dumbledore, Harry guessed. Or maybe Dumbledore helped him find a new herd of centaurs to join, since he’d been ostracized from the one in the Forbidden Forest.

Ginny shifted her position a little, and Harry suddenly thought of Hermione and Neville yesterday after the attack, on the sofa together, her arm around him. He was happy for them, but envied them a little. It would really be nice to have a girlfriend, he thought, especially someone like Ginny who's funny, really nice, and likes to fly and play Quidditch...

He imagined himself and Ginny walking through Diagon Alley, holding hands, going to Florean Fortescue's for ice cream and cake, as he knew many couples did. Hermione and Neville might be right now, he thought. In his mind's eye, he and Ginny were at a table, laughing as she reached over to wipe off frosting from his lower lip. She leaned over and kissed him... and as they broke apart, they saw a Death Eater pointing a wand at Harry, a green bolt flying toward him. He saw Ginny leap in front of him to take the bolt meant for him; he looked on in horror as she fell to the ground.

Yanked back to reality, he stiffened, with a slight shudder. Ginny looked at him quizzically. He let go of her and quickly stood, the feeling that he was endangering her right then just by holding her taking him over. This is why you don't let yourself think about having a girlfriend, you idiot, he told himself. Not only could that happen, it'd be pretty likely to happen. I can't let myself think like that, I can't put anyone in that kind of danger. As he thought it, he realized that she would probably jump in front of a Killing Curse for him anyway, girlfriend or not, but it represented what he feared most. He knew he couldn't allow it.

She stood as well, looking at him with great concern. "What?" she asked.

He could hardly tell her what had just gone through his mind. "Nothing," he said, sounding unconvincing even to himself.

"Uh-huh," she said, sounding like she knew that he knew she didn't believe it. "It's yesterday again, isn't it?" This time, it was a question.

Trying to calm down, Harry nodded. Technically a lie, he thought, but close enough to the truth. She stepped forward and hugged him. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said.

He resisted the urge to push her away for her own safety, as he knew it was irrational. Even so, he found himself saying, “I just don’t feel like you’re safe with me.”

She hugged him more tightly. “We’re safe here, at Hogwarts.”

“I mean—“

”I know, not only right now,” she said, running a hand across his back. “You’ll be well protected, Harry, and the better you’re protected, the safer we are. You’ll get through this, we all will. You have to believe that.”

He nodded. “I guess I have to, since I’m stuck with the situation anyway.” He moved his head off her shoulder to look at her, and was heartened by the love and support he saw in her eyes. “Thanks. I’m just being stupid, thinking things I shouldn’t think.”

“It’s really understandable,” she said.

Yes, it is, he thought wryly, most sixteen-year-olds would daydream about having a girlfriend. I just don’t get to. “I suppose so,” he conceded. “Want to fly some more?”

“Sure,” she agreed. They mounted their brooms and kicked off again, flying high into the air. He couldn’t totally escape being Harry Potter and all that came with it, he thought, but when he was flying with a friend, it seemed very far away.

CHAPTER 18

THE REPULSION CHARM

The Aurors had Harry and Neville for three training sessions during the rest of vacation, pleasing both greatly. Ron continued to be supportive, so Harry hoped that his emotional reaction that Monday night had been a one-time thing. Lupin came for dinner just after the New Year, and Harry discovered that Lupin had very mixed feelings about the notion of changing the limits of freedom to meet the current threat. As a werewolf, he had strong reason to fear it, but as a member of the Order of the Phoenix, he knew it could save many lives. He didn't come down on any one side, but Harry felt he was closer to himself and Molly than to Arthur and Hermione.

Hermione and Neville visited the Burrow frequently during the last week of vacation, giving them a chance to spend time together in a relaxed setting. Harry noticed that Neville was slowly starting to be more comfortable with the idea of Hermione as his girlfriend, sometimes being the one to hold her hand or sit closer to her. Molly thought it was wonderful, and to the great amusement of the others, was inspired to ask Ron if there were any girls at Hogwarts he was interested in.

Harry did not venture out in public again during vacation. Ron and Ginny thought that a short trip to Diagon Alley would be safe, but Harry just wasn't in the mood, even if not for security considerations. After the incident at the department store, Harry's security had been upgraded, and now rather than one Order member, there would be two Aurors shadowing him every time he appeared in public; his protection was now official. Just like the bloody Prime Minister, he thought, remembering Vernon's words. Still, Harry welcomed it to the extent that it would keep his friends safer if they were with him. He apologized to the Aurors for the

inconvenience, but they all said they didn't mind. "Part of our job, Harry," Jack Temble had said. "One day, you yourself may be protecting people who really can defend themselves well enough not to need protection." Several other Aurors teased him about this as well, having heard what he had accomplished in the department store. Harry was very happy to be teased, as he knew it signaled respect and acceptance.

Sunday night finally came, and while Harry wasn't dreading going back to Hogwarts, he was less eager than he had been before, mainly because he enjoyed life so much at the Burrow. Ron and Ginny were always around, he felt closer to Arthur and Molly than ever before, and Neville and Hermione were just a fireplace away. He knew that despite the department store attack it had been a very good two weeks, and that he would probably be nostalgic for it in the future.

Not too long before he and the others were to leave, Molly asked him if she could have a word with him in the kitchen. He followed her in, to find Arthur already sitting at the table. They sat down; Harry wondered if he was going to get some last-minute advice about being careful.

Instead, Molly surprised him by saying, "Harry, Ginny had a talk with us about the conversation you all had the day you went to the department store. The one about gold."

Harry had almost forgotten about that. He nodded for her to continue.

"First of all, Harry, it's so wonderful of you to want to do that. Ginny told us everything you said, and we can understand why you feel that way. We know how strongly you feel about it, and we take it seriously if only for that reason."

"Did she ask you the Bill question?" Harry asked.

She nodded wryly. "The little sneak," she said with amusement. "I taught her too well. My answer was 'maybe.' I said that we would probably take it, but only if there was something we particularly needed it for, or knew we would use it for. We wouldn't just take it for no other reason than to have it. We would know that

Bill would take care of it, and would always want to help us in the future if we needed it. And we know that's how it is with you as well."

"And as Ron told you," added Arthur, "we're doing fairly well now. He's right, with fewer children in the house, there have been fewer expenses. Now, there are always things we could buy, but the fact is, we don't mind that so much. There's much more to life than having a lot of nice stuff. We're not thrilled that the kids had to use so many hand-me-downs, of course, but there are worse things in life. The kids knew they were loved, and they always had enough of things they really needed. But as for us, we really didn't care."

"But we understand your reasons for wanting to do something like this, Harry, and we do appreciate it," said Molly. "And if there was some luxury item I really, really wanted, I would ask you for it. I think I just got out of the habit of really wanting things like that. But Ginny said you almost looked pained, you wanted to do something for Ron, or her, or us so badly. And you have done something for us, Harry, and it has nothing to do with gold. It's that card, it's mentioning us in the article, it's just being this wonderful person that you are. That's worth so much more than gold, and I think you know that.

"But because of how much you want to do something, here's what I'll do: I'm going to give you my blessing to buy Ron the Firebolt." Harry's eyes went wide. "It was sweet of Ron to worry about my reaction if he just took you up on your offer. But I've decided that the broom he's using can go to Ginny, since she plays Quidditch as well. So you can get it for him anytime you want to."

Harry broke into a wide grin. "Thank you, thank you very much," he said happily. "And you know, I know that money isn't everything, and it's not even that important. It's just nice to be able to do something like this. I remembered how I felt when Sirius got me my Firebolt, even though I didn't know it was him at first. I've wanted to do something like this for Ron for a long time. It's not much, compared to what he, and you, have done for me. I just don't see the point of having this much gold and not doing something like this."

“Well, the chess computer has been a great success,” said Arthur. “I wouldn’t have minded having a go—I taught chess to Ron, but he’s better than me now—but I couldn’t find him at a time he wasn’t playing it.”

Harry smiled. “He’s just so used to playing against me, and he’s happy for an opponent who can beat him. More of a challenge. But yes, I’ve been really happy that he’s played it so much.”

“I think Ginny’s happy about that, too,” said Molly with amusement. “She said that it meant that she got to spend much more time with you than usual.”

“I know, it was really good,” agreed Harry. “It’s always hard for us at school, because we’re different years. This vacation was very good for that. In fact, except for the department store attack, these two weeks have been really terrific. I’ve never felt so... at home. It’s a great feeling. Thank you.”

“I suppose it’s easier to appreciate when you haven’t really had that before,” said Arthur. “Most people get used to it. You know we want you to think of this as your home, Harry.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Molly, “will you even be going back to the Dursleys after this school year? Now that you’re of age, it doesn’t seem strictly necessary, does it? Also, not only could you stay here, but you could stay at Hogwarts if you wanted to, I would imagine. The teachers have quarters; you just don’t use them because you want to be in your dormitory. I would think that as a teacher, you could simply stay at the castle if you wanted. Of course, we always hope you’ll stay here.”

“I know, Molly. I’d rather stay here too, of course. But I really hadn’t thought about it. You’re right, though, I can’t imagine why I would need to go back to the Dursleys. The reason was always for my protection, but that doesn’t seem to be an issue, so much, since I was going to turn seventeen this summer anyway. I would have had to leave at some point. I guess the answer is, we’ll see what Dumbledore says. If he says I should go to Privet Drive, then I suppose I will, though I’d really rather not.”

“We’ll talk to him, Harry, and see what he says. You should get going, it’s almost time to go,” said Arthur. They stood up. Arthur clapped Harry on the shoulder, and Harry exchanged a hug and kiss with Molly. He headed out to the living room, sat down on the sofa next to Ginny, and told her about the conversation.

“Let me know when you order it, okay?” she asked. “I want to be able to see his face when it arrives.” He said he would.

They took the Knight Bus back to Hogwarts. Harry could have Apparated to outside the school’s gate, but he preferred to travel with Ron and Ginny. They arrived at Gryffindor Tower a little before nine, and went up to their dormitory room. Dean and Seamus were unpacking their trunks.

“Harry, Ron,” greeted Dean. “Have a good vacation?”

They chuckled. “Mostly,” said Harry.

“Didn’t you hear, Dean?” asked Seamus. “Harry and the others were attacked in a Muggle department store by some Death Eaters.”

Dean looked alarmed, but not too much, since Harry had obviously ended up unharmed. “I don’t get the Prophet at home, so no, I didn’t know. Was anybody hurt?” he asked, as Neville walked into the dormitory.

“No, they were all okay, according to the article,” said Seamus. “Harry captured two of them, and one got away.”

Now Dean was impressed. “You captured two Death Eaters? By yourself?”

“Well, Neville helped,” said Harry.

“Not that much,” put in Neville. “I just distracted them, you did the hard stuff.”

“Neville, those things I threw at them... they probably would have seen them coming if they hadn’t been busy dealing with your ropes. All I did was that and the anti-Disapparation field.”

“Oh, yeah, practically nothing,” mocked Seamus. “You were just able to keep two Death Eaters from Disapparating. Anybody could do it.” Harry wondered

if he was being overly modest again, but he felt that what he said had been the truth.

“I didn’t see the article, Seamus,” said Ron. “Did they say anything else except the basics of what happened?”

“There was an analysis article,” replied Seamus, “about why they did it, how Voldemort’s still trying to take Harry out. They said that Voldemort must be getting desperate, that it’s the third time in a few months, not counting the dreams. Usually someone who Voldemort wants dead ends up dead, but not Harry. The article also sort of wondered how long Harry could stay alive, that there would almost certainly be more attempts.”

Harry looked Seamus in the eye. “I’m going to stay alive, Seamus, if for no other reason than to tick him off. If he’s furious that he can’t kill me, then I want him to stay that way.” The rest chuckled.

“I wonder, Harry,” said Dean, “his minions don’t seem to be doing their jobs. Why doesn’t he just get you himself? He could have come to the department store.”

Harry had wondered the same thing. “I don’t know, Dean. If I had to guess, I’d say that while he wants me dead, he doesn’t want it badly enough to accept any risk to himself. For all he knows, I could be surrounded by a bunch of invisible Aurors. He knows that Dumbledore’s gone to great lengths to keep me alive, and he doesn’t know what Dumbledore might have done. He fears Dumbledore, so I think that’s why he hasn’t tried.”

“Harry is going to get an Auror security detail, the article said,” added Seamus.

Harry raised his eyebrows, “I didn’t know they were going to make that public knowledge,” he said. “I thought they’d keep it secret. Maybe catch more Death Eaters.”

Ron looked doubtful. “Especially after that, Harry, I think they figure that Voldemort would assume you had security anyway, so it’s not such a big secret. Maybe they also want to even discourage the attempts, even if they’ll probably fail.”

“Thank goodness for the Auror training,” said Harry. Neville nodded, and explained to Dean and Seamus. They were surprised that Harry got to train with Aurors, and astonished that Neville did. “I feel like somebody took Polyjuice Potion and replaced Neville,” said Dean.

“That’s not even the best part,” said Harry, smiling. “Neville has—“

”Oh, come on, Harry,” said an embarrassed Neville. “Do you have to?”

“Do you think it’s going to be a secret for very long, Neville?” pointed out Harry. To Dean and Seamus, he said, “Neville has a girlfriend.” He waited for a few seconds, enjoying their shocked expressions, then added, “It’s Hermione.” Harry almost laughed, as their shock had deepened considerably. They gaped at Neville.

Neville looked at Harry, annoyed. “Are you going to tell everybody?”

Harry, still smiling, shook his head. “Just them, and Justin and Ernie, if I can before someone else does. But no one else, Neville, I promise.”

“I have a feeling Hermione will tell a few people,” pointed out Ron. “People are going to look at you funny for a few days, Neville, and then it’ll be back to normal. You’ll get used to it. But you can’t expect us not to have some fun with it.”

They spent another hour talking to Seamus and Dean about their vacations, then got ready for bed. Harry sat in bed, prepared for the next day’s Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons, practiced Occlumency, and went to sleep.

He woke up at his usual time of seven the next morning, got dressed, and headed down to the Great Hall with Ron and Neville. They took their usual seats, and Hermione showed up a few minutes later.

“So, how did Parvati and Lavender react to the news, Hermione?” asked Ron.

She sighed. "I would just as soon not have told them. Like I've said, we aren't that close. But I figured they'd be offended if they heard it from someone other than me, so I told them. They were surprised."

Neville looked at Hermione skeptically. "I think you mean amazed, astonished, stunned—"

"All right, Neville," she said impatiently. "You know how I feel about you saying things like that."

"It's the truth," responded Neville. "You just don't want to admit it. You should have seen Seamus and Dean's faces. Probably everyone's going to react like that. You can't go around being upset at everyone."

"Watch me," she replied. Neville grinned.

"Hermione, you have to give people a little break," said Harry. "I mean, we were amazed, and we know Neville better than they do. Once we think about it, it makes sense, but it was just a bit of a shock. People still think of Neville as shy, so of course they're going to be surprised. I don't think they mean to insult Neville by reacting like that."

"I don't care what they mean, I just don't like it," said Hermione, obviously unmoved.

Harry saw Ron looking off into the distance. He looked where Ron was, and saw Malfoy walking toward the Slytherin table, with Pansy and Crabbe. He was surprised not to see Goyle with them, but as they sat down, he saw that Goyle was already at the table. More to Neville and Hermione than to Harry, Ron said, "Remember, Malfoy's out of his box, so we have to be careful, and monitor his movements as much as we can." Hermione and Neville nodded in agreement. Harry thought to say something to the effect that he wasn't worried about Malfoy, but the prospect of a storm of criticism stopped him.

Harry had eaten about half of his breakfast when he looked up and saw Justin and Ernie walk up. "Hey, guys," said Harry. "Have a good vacation?"

"Better than yours, according to the Prophet," said Ernie.

“Except for that, though, mine was very good,” replied Harry.

“Good to see those murder attempts aren’t keeping you down, Harry,” said Justin. “We’ve decided that an attempt on your life also warrants a trip over here on our part.”

“Well, you might as well just stay here and take regular seats at the table,” joked Harry.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” said Ernie. “The rest of you have eventful vacations?”

Hermione had the look of someone who wanted to get something over with. “I have a boyfriend now,” she said.

Harry watched Ernie for a reaction, but Ernie looked blank. Justin smiled. “That’s great, Hermione. Who is it?”

“It’s Neville,” said Hermione.

Harry thought that Justin was about to accuse Hermione of pulling his leg, but Justin saw her face and realized she was serious, and so avoided her wrath. Ernie was speechless, with a look of undisguised shock. “Wow,” said Justin. “That’s pretty... unexpected. How did that happen?”

Hermione started to explain it to them as Harry turned back to his food. He had taken two more bites when he felt something vibrate in his robes. He took out his Galleon and saw that it was Pansy sending the emergency signal. He surreptitiously showed it to Neville, who took it from him and held it up so that Ron and Hermione could see it, but Justin and Ernie couldn’t. Harry stood up and looked over at the Slytherin table, and found Pansy sitting there, talking to Malfoy, in no apparent distress. Harry suddenly realized that the signal could be a warning as well. He looked around as Hermione stood as well, followed by Ron and Neville. Justin and Ernie looked nonplused as Hermione stopped her story.

“See anything?” Harry asked the others.

“Nothing really...” said Hermione. “Oh, wait, Goyle’s heading in this direction. Harry, get out your wand.”

“He’s probably just leaving the Hall,” Harry said, dismissive of any danger.

“Harry, he’s by himself! How often does that happen?” asked Hermione, very concerned. Goyle was closer, now less than ten seconds away.

“Harry, get out your damn wand!” Neville insisted urgently. Taken aback by Neville’s manner, Harry did so immediately. He focused on calming his mind, just in case. He was sure that there was nothing Goyle could or would do, by himself, in front of so many people. Still, he was prepared, no longer taking Pansy’s signal lightly. Ron, Hermione, and Neville already had their wands out.

Goyle reached the point where he would pass Harry and the others, then turned in their direction. No more than six feet away, Harry saw a blank look on Goyle’s face as Goyle started to raise his arm. Imperius Curse, Harry instantly knew.

Ron, Hermione, and Neville didn’t wait for Goyle to finish his motion. Ron shouted “Expelliarmus!” as Hermione shot off a Stunning spell, and Neville tried to wrap Goyle in ropes. Each spell bounced off, ineffective, as Goyle’s arm reached full extension, held out in front of him. There was nothing in Goyle’s hand, but he appeared to be holding something, and using his other hand to support it.

In a flash, Harry deduced what was happening. He realized that Goyle’s arm and hand were in the familiar position, as Harry had seen in countless Muggle movies, of a person holding a weapon. He has a gun, maybe a machine gun, but it’s invisible, Harry thought. He also has something that repels magic. Harry knew that any offensive spell would be useless, as would the Protection Charm, since bullets were non-magical... but they’re projectiles, he realized. It’s like having something thrown at you. These thoughts went through his head in a half a second, after which he instantly activated the Repulsion Charm the Aurors had taught him.

Hermione realized what was happening as well. “Harry!” she screamed. “It’s a—“

She was cut off by the very loud sound of bullets being fired, but it sounded to Harry as though no more than five or six were fired before they stopped. Students in the Hall gasped in surprise as they heard the highly unfamiliar

sounds. His face never changing expression, Goyle suddenly lurched back and fell, blood already pouring from the gaping wounds in his chest. The bullets had moved too quickly for Harry to see them reverse their direction at the behest of his spell, but it was obvious that they had. A few people close enough to see Goyle shrieked as Ginny came streaking up from the other end of the table, wand out. Harry felt slightly dazed. “Keep your eyes open, there could be more,” said Neville. He, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny looked around warily, but saw nothing.

Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Vector came running over from their seats at the teachers’ table. “Get Madam Pomfrey,” said McGonagall to Vector, who left immediately. Harry couldn’t help but think there would be little for Madam Pomfrey to do; Goyle had been holding the weapon nearly right in front of his heart, and so had suffered the wounds there.

A crowd of Gryffindors started to form, but appalled by Goyle’s condition, nobody got too close. Flitwick was trying to do some basic first aid with his wand. “What happened?” asked McGonagall.

“He used a Muggle weapon called a machine gun, Professor,” said Hermione, as Harry saw Justin nod in confirmation to McGonagall. “It’s been made invisible, but it should be on the ground near him.”

McGonagall took out her wand and waved it, and suddenly everyone could see a small, modern-looking machine gun lying near Goyle’s profusely bleeding body. Harry actually thought he could see blood pulsing out of Goyle’s chest. “That is what made that sound?” McGonagall asked.

Hermione nodded. “He fired it at Harry. I don’t know why they hit him and not...” she trailed off, realizing.

“You used the Repulsion Charm,” said McGonagall.

Harry nodded. “The Aurors taught me that,” he confirmed. “I couldn’t think of anything else to do. Their spells didn’t work on him, I don’t know why.”

“He was under the Imperius Curse, Professor,” said Hermione. “His eyes... I could tell.”

“Voldemort?” asked Ron. Harry, Hermione, and McGonagall nodded, as Madam Pomfrey rushed into the Hall and knelt next to Goyle. She gasped at the damage and the amount of blood on the floor; Flitwick had been able to do little. She inspected Goyle for a few seconds, then stood up, facing McGonagall.

“He’s dead, Minerva,” she said, as those in the Hall who could hear her gasped. “Even if I’d been right here when it happened, even if we could have Disapparated him away, it wouldn’t have made any difference. He lost liters of blood, his heart’s been practically shredded. What kind of disgusting weapon...” She saw the machine gun next to him.

Dumbledore walked into the Hall, and in seconds had reached Harry and the others. “What happened?” he asked Harry, after making a quick survey of the scene.

“Goyle walked over,” Harry said, realizing the whole Hall, now silent, was trying to listen. “We were on guard, because he’s never alone, it was very unusual. He stopped right there, and made a motion that looked like an attack, lifting something up. Ron, Hermione, and Neville hit him with spells, but they bounced off. From the way he was holding his arm and hand, I realized it was a Muggle machine gun, made invisible, and he was going to fire at me. I used the Repulsion Charm, and the bullets hit him instead. Hermione and I think he was under the Imperius Curse. He had a very blank look in his eyes.”

Dumbledore nodded and turned to talk to McGonagall, but Harry was not listening. He felt odd, as if he should be feeling something, but wasn’t. Did I just kill someone? he wondered. Dazed, he felt Ginny take his hand.

Dumbledore faced the Hall. “Your attention, please. An attempt, I should say, another attempt, has been made on Professor Potter’s life. Gregory Goyle, very likely under the Imperius Curse and directed by Voldemort, attempted to use a Muggle weapon to kill Professor Potter. Mr. Goyle was also wearing a device which negates magic for a limited time, and so could not be Disarmed, which Professor Potter’s friends attempted to do. Professor Potter used the Repulsion Charm as a

defensive measure, and the bullets intended for him instead struck and killed his attacker. I wish to emphasize that this was the only option available to Professor Potter, and he is in no way responsible for Mr. Goyle's death." Harry wondered if Dumbledore was saying that for his benefit, or to stop rumors from spreading.

Dumbledore paused, then continued. "There will be no classes today; the classes scheduled for today will be held at later times to be decided. Everyone will return to their quarters until further notice. Prefects, please make sure all students from your House have returned, then report to your Head of House for further instructions."

Hermione and Ron were obviously in no mood to let Harry out of their sight, which Dumbledore could tell immediately. "Harry will be safe, I promise you," Dumbledore said to them kindly. They nodded, and started herding the Gryffindors back to Gryffindor Tower. Ginny squeezed Harry's hand, whispered "It'll be okay," and reluctantly followed Ron and Hermione.

Harry glanced at Justin and Ernie, and realized they knew something the others didn't. He stepped closer to Dumbledore and whispered, "Sir, please ask Justin and Ernie to stay back a moment." Immediately, Dumbledore said, "Mr. Macmillan, Mr. Finch-Fletchley, would you remain a moment, please." Looking confused, they did so, Ernie leaving Hannah Abbott to guide the Hufflepuffs back to their living area.

All the students had gone. With Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape at his back, Harry faced the two. "Justin, Ernie... what I'm about to say is very serious, very important, and very confidential." He looked at them for a moment to emphasize it, then continued. "You heard me say, so the Hall could hear, that we were alerted to danger by Goyle's approach. As you've probably already figured out, that's not exactly true. You saw that we knew there was danger before we knew what it was. Hermione just recognized Goyle as that danger."

They nodded. "I was wondering," said Ernie.

“I strongly suggest,” said Dumbledore, “that you wonder about it no further.”

Harry nodded. “You’ve had to have guessed, then, that we were alerted to the danger by something else. I can’t tell you what that is, and you shouldn’t try to guess. If you had gone back to the Hufflepuff common room and said to others, ‘They knew about the danger before they saw Goyle,’ it would have gotten around, and there’s every chance that the way I got that warning would go away. My life was saved by that warning, and might be again in the future. You mustn’t tell anyone about this, and it’s better if you don’t talk about it among yourselves, in case you’re overheard.”

“Are you both comfortable in feeling that you can comply with Harry’s request?” asked Dumbledore. Both nodded somberly. “Thank you,” said Harry.

“You may now return to your common room,” said Dumbledore. They turned and left without another word.

The Hall was nearly empty; only Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape remained. Flitwick was helping Madam Pomfrey move the body to the infirmary.

“Harry,” said Dumbledore gently. “Are you all right?” Harry understood that Dumbledore was referring to his emotional state.

“I’m just kind of numb,” he said. “I’ve never... I mean, I know I didn’t kill him, exactly, but I kind of did, in a way. I just don’t know what to think.”

“You should think, Harry,” said McGonagall, “that you did what you had to do.”

“The death is tragic, regardless of the circumstances, but was unavoidable,” agreed Dumbledore. “I know that you would have preferred that he been taken into custody than that he died, but that was not an option.”

“But he didn’t choose what he did, did he?” pressed Harry. “If he was under the Imperius Curse, he may not have wanted to kill me.”

“That is indeed possible, Harry,” agreed Dumbledore. “We will never know what he wanted or did not want, just that he was a pawn of Voldemort’s. But you must not hold yourself responsible.”

“That’s the strange thing, I don’t,” said Harry. “I would think I would, but I don’t. And I don’t know if it’s because it was Goyle, and if I would feel differently if it were anyone else, some random person put under the Imperius Curse. He may or may not have been willing, but his father obviously was.” He paused. “Why did they place him under the Imperius Curse, though? Why not try to get him to do it willingly?”

“Because while he might have killed you willingly, Harry, he would not have done it willingly with no regard for the consequences to him. Goyle had no means of escape, and would obviously have been captured had he killed you. This was of course irrelevant to Voldemort, who clearly put him under the Imperius Curse to force him to disregard his self-interest.”

“But why so soon after... wait, how long does the Imperius Curse last?”

“Yes, Harry, it lasts less than a day. From Voldemort’s perspective, it had to be done now, or not at all.” Dumbledore changed topics. “Harry, how were you alerted to the danger?”

“These,” he said, taking the fake Galleon out of his pocket. “Hermione made them for signaling. Pansy sent me the emergency signal; we looked around and saw Goyle. She must have known it was going to happen; I’m surprised she didn’t break her cover to warn me more directly.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “Unless I am very much mistaken, Harry, we will discover that Pansy was not told anything. Even Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Crabbe will not have known, as from Voldemort’s perspective, they did not need to. Pansy must have made the same deduction that you and Hermione did, and signaled you so you would be on the alert.”

Harry nodded, impressed. If that was true, then Pansy had definitely saved his life. Though he had said that to Justin and Ernie, he hadn’t been exactly sure.

“Severus, please send Miss Parkinson to my office. After she has returned, please send Mr. Malfoy, then Mr. Crabbe.” Snape left the Hall, and Dumbledore motioned for Harry to accompany him to his office

A few minutes later, they were in Dumbledore’s office, and there was a knock on the door. It opened, and Pansy walked in. As she had after the Quidditch match, she ran over to Harry and hugged him, holding on tightly. When she released him, he looked into her eyes. “You saved my life, Pansy. Thank you... seems like too little to say, but it’s all I can think of right now.” She looked back at him proudly.

“Indeed, Pansy, you have done us all a great service, and you have our profound thanks... even from those who cannot yet know what you have done,” said Dumbledore. “May I ask, on the basis of what information did you signal Harry?”

“Malfoy had been talking about how strangely Goyle had been acting ever since they got back. He mentioned it a little in the common room last night, and then again as we were heading to breakfast. Goyle wasn’t hanging out with Malfoy or Crabbe, or doing anything he usually did. Malfoy obviously had no idea what was happening, or else he might not have said anything, even to me. When I saw Goyle at breakfast, he just looked so strange. Then he just got up, without a word, and walked away. When I saw him heading in Harry’s direction, I knew it could look like he was just leaving the Hall, but he never leaves that way.

“I seriously thought about breaking cover, even though I didn’t know what was going on. But I realized I wouldn’t be able to do anything useful, and anyway, I could be wrong, and then my cover would be blown. So I decided to send the signal, and pray that Harry made the right conclusions.”

“In that case,” said Harry, “the only smart thing I did was to show the Galleon to the others. I thought it was nothing, but they were smart enough to take it seriously.”

“So, had Pansy not signaled you, Harry, you would surely be dead,” said Dumbledore. “You would not have noticed Goyle’s approach, and he surely would have been able to fire on you before you could have known what was going on. Even if you had reacted quickly, you would have chosen a conventional spell, such as your friends did, which would have been ineffective.”

Harry nodded, and took Pansy’s hand. “Thank you. I know I already said it, but I’ll say it again. I guess I should admit that I shouldn’t have told you all those times to come out in the open.”

“It was because you were worried, Harry, I understand,” she said, squeezing his hand. “But I’m glad you said that.”

“Sir,” Harry said to Dumbledore, “there’s one thing I don’t understand. We have to assume that Voldemort figures he’s got three shots at me—Goyle, Crabbe, and Malfoy. Now there’s two left. Why didn’t they just train Goyle as a Death Eater like they did with Nott? It seems like they could have put him to better use.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “As we have seen, Harry, Voldemort has no regard for the interests of the people he uses, ally or enemy. He could have put anyone under the Imperius Curse, but if he abducted a Hogwarts student to do so, the student’s disappearance would have been noticed, as would the change in their behavior. It had to be someone whose relatives were willing. As for training him, that takes quite a while; it is not something that can be done in two weeks. Even you, with great natural talent, still have a ways to go to reach Auror-level skill, though you did accomplish much over the six days of your training. While many Death Eaters do not have Auror-level skill, Mr. Goyle had below-average magical talent, and was no doubt considered unsuitable to be made a Death Eater. Voldemort would have considered him a low-value resource. The only thing that made him useful at all was that he was a Hogwarts student.

“What Voldemort did, unfortunately, must be seen—apart from the terrible human cost—as tactically and strategically sound, from his point of view. To have Mr. Goyle use a machine gun was a brilliant idea, given the circumstances. You

could not Disapparate, and Fawkes could not have helped you. You would not be expecting it, and once Goyle was given a means of defense against most common spells, you had one and only one defense. The plan was almost perfect; so many elements were needed to foil it. Had the Aurors not taught you the Repulsion Charm, had Pansy not signaled you, had your friends not been assiduous in your defense, had you not been Muggle-raised... if even one of those were absent, you would be dead. From Voldemort's point of view, the plan had a low cost and a high probability of success."

Harry chuckled; Pansy looked at him in surprise. "I was just thinking about how angry Voldemort must be right now. He must think I'm charmed or something. I can imagine him thinking, 'What do I have to do to kill him?' There is some satisfaction in him feeling that way. He won't have another chance for months."

"Not necessarily, Harry," pointed out Pansy. "Even if we assume that Crabbe is no more useful to Voldemort than Goyle was, there's still Malfoy. We have to assume that he's getting instructions from Voldemort. He's going to be very careful, whatever he does. I just hope I can get him to confide in me. I'm very glad I didn't end up breaking my cover. You still need me."

Harry could not argue with that. He said, "Is there any chance, sir, that Pansy could be suspected from what happened today? I mean, we were on the alert before there was any reason to be."

Pansy opened her mouth to protest, but Dumbledore spoke first. "It is a legitimate question, Pansy, one that must be considered," he said. "It was quite clever of you, Harry, to say what you said earlier about Mr. Goyle's approach being unusual. It is perhaps a small stretch, but given the recent attempts on your life, no one—including Mr. Malfoy—will think it terribly strange that your friends were on their guard at seeing something unusual, and reacted defensively. More importantly, no suspicion will fall on Pansy, because there was nothing for her to know. A person cannot be suspected of leaking information they did not have, and Mr. Malfoy will

know she did not have it, because he did not. There is no reason for anyone to suspect her.”

He paused, and gave Pansy a grave look. “Pansy, I am sure that you would wish me to expel Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Crabbe, even in the absence of a reason to do so. It pains me that I feel I cannot do this. I know that I am putting Harry at risk, and also putting you at risk, for the sake of abstract principles. But they are important ones.”

To Harry’s surprise, she nodded. “I understand, sir. Do you know about the notebooks that Harry bought for Hermione and I?” Dumbledore shook his head, and she explained. Then she said, “I’ve asked Hermione some questions about what you said last time, about what happens when you ignore principles because of fear. She said Harry asked her about it, too. She told me a lot of stuff, gave some good examples of the kind of thing that can happen. She’d make a very good History of Magic teacher. But I understand a little better why you do this the way you do. I can’t say it doesn’t frustrate me, but given how much you love Harry, sir, it’s very noble of you to do it this way.”

“Thank you, Pansy, I appreciate that,” said Dumbledore. “One always wishes one’s actions to be understood in the proper context, especially when the context is a subtle and nuanced one such as this. I also wish to express my own deep appreciation and admiration for what you are doing. I know it is very difficult.” Harry nodded in agreement.

She looked at him with concern. “I’ll just be happy when it’s all over, when you’re not in danger anymore, at least at Hogwarts.”

“So will I, believe me,” agreed Harry.

Dumbledore rose. “You should be returning to the Slytherin area now, Pansy. Of course, you understand that you should give the impression that I simply asked you what you knew about Mr. Goyle’s actions, as I will be asking Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Crabbe. Being seen as under suspicion by me will assist your cover, though it will not make you popular around the school.”

She gave him a wan smile. “You mean, it’ll make me even more disliked and unpopular than I already am. Believe me, that’s not anything I’m worried about.” She turned to Harry. “Harry, when I send the emergency signal, please, always take it very seriously. Assume that your life is under threat, and take every precaution you can. I care about you so much...”

Harry nodded, suddenly feeling guilty about not having considered Goyle much of a threat. “I will, I promise,” he said. She gave him a last concerned look, nodded, and left.

“You should head back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “After lunch, students will be able to move freely again.”

“I understand. When will my classes be rescheduled, sir?”

“Most of the classes will be made up on Saturday, but I was vague about that earlier because you have commitments with the Aurors on Saturdays. You should consult with Professor McGonagall about what times are possible, both for you and your first years.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll talk to her.”

“There are two more things, Harry. After today’s events, combined with what happened in the department store, I think it highly likely that your friends will want to accompany you and monitor your movements at all times. They will want to be your security detail inside Hogwarts. I would suggest that you resist your natural inclination to resist their help. It will make them feel better, in addition to what practical use it may have. This is almost as hard on them as it is on you.”

“I understand, sir. I admit I hadn’t thought of it that way. I’ve been too busy feeling sorry for myself. What was the other thing?”

“I wished to thank you for your Christmas presents. They were most thoughtful.”

Harry smiled. He had bought Dumbledore a bag of lemon drops and five pairs of thick woolen socks. He was pleased that Dumbledore was happy. “I thought you might like lemon drops, since that’s this year’s password.”

“Yes, I have always had a fondness for them,” Dumbledore agreed. “In fact, I recall having one in front of four Privet Drive, the day I left you there. And the socks are very comfortable.”

“Now you can look into the Mirror of Erised and see yourself as you will be right then,” Harry joked.

“With sufficiently warm feet, anyway,” agreed Dumbledore. “I think you knew that what I said was meant both to be humorous and to deflect your question. But I will tell you now, in all seriousness, what I would see if I looked into that mirror today. I would see you, as an adult, surrounded by a loving wife and family, fulfilled, happy, and safe.”

Harry felt a lump in his throat. “Thank you...” he almost automatically said ‘sir,’ but changed his mind. “Thank you, Albus. That means a lot to me.”

“I am very glad, Harry,” Dumbledore replied. Harry nodded and left.

Harry walked back to Gryffindor Tower alone, reflecting that such solitude was about to become uncommon. “Chicken curry,” he said to the portrait, which swung open. He climbed in, and was quickly greeted by the first years, who seemed to have been waiting at the portrait hole for him. Andrea Creevey hugged him, after which all the other first year girls did as well. Some of them thanked him again for the cards. He spent a few minutes talking to them and other interested Gryffindors about the morning’s attack, and the one during vacation. They were all obviously very impressed that he had captured two Death Eaters, regardless of his emphasis on Neville’s role. After fifteen minutes, the crowd dispersed, and he headed over to the fireplace, where Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny had saved a spot for him. He sat down between Hermione and Ginny. Fawkes joined them, perching on Harry’s shoulder.

Hermione leaned over and hugged him by the shoulders, leaning her head against his. “Harry... oh, your life is so hard...” She looked into his eyes, wanting to convey her support. He took her closest hand and gripped it in appreciation.

He looked up and caught a glance at Neville, who was also looking at Harry supportively. Harry suddenly realized that this was the first time that Hermione had been physically affectionate with him since becoming Neville's girlfriend. He looked at her quizzically, and glanced at Neville. Hermione understood his meaning.

"It's okay, Harry, don't worry," she said, not moving her head from his shoulder. "I've already talked about this with Neville. You need our support, and I'm not going to stop hugging you or whatever, especially after you almost just got killed. Neville's not going to be jealous. He knows he's the one I want."

Neville nodded his confirmation. "Really, it's okay, Harry. I know she's like that, it's how she is. Remember, she was like that with me too, before we got together." He paused. "Besides, it works both ways, this isn't just something that she can do that I can't. She's told me that I can also be as physically affectionate with you as I want."

Harry burst out laughing, as did Ron, Ginny, and a few other Gryffindors in hearing range. Hermione leaned towards Neville and playfully pushed him lightly on his face. "Ginny! I said Ginny!" she said.

"Oh, Ginny! I thought you said Harry," Neville said, to more laughter. "But both are okay, right?"

"No, Neville, you have to pick one," Hermione said, going along with the joke.

"Hmmm... tough choice," said Neville, smiling.

"I sincerely hope not," said Harry. "Ginny's much cuter than I am."

"Why, thank you, Harry," she said. "It reminds me of when you said that it was better that I kissed you than Neville did, and now you say I'm cuter than you. I'll be over the moon someday when you actually compare me favorably to a female."

After he finished laughing, Harry said, "Sorry, Ginny. I didn't mean to... oh, Hermione, what's that phrase, it means that a compliment is so weak that it's—"

"To damn with faint praise," she supplied.

“Yes, thank you, I didn’t mean to do that. I think you’re very cute, period. Is that better?”

She looked at him, seeming to be trying to find out whether he really meant it. Then she said, “Yes, that’s better.”

Harry felt very content, considering what had just happened, and realized why. He said, “Thanks, Neville. I really needed a good laugh.”

“Any time,” Neville said. “Any time I can think of something funny, anyway. And Harry...” Neville paused and looked at him very seriously. “You may not like this, but we’re going to be staying as close to you as we can. It’s obvious that you’re not totally safe in the school, especially as long as Malfoy and Crabbe are still here. We know you can take care of yourself really well, and we might be more annoying than helpful, but—“

”Neville,” said Harry, and Neville stopped talking. “I understand why, and I’m not going to argue. Of course it’s not my preference, but I know it’ll be helpful. I mean, Pansy was the main one who saved my life, but you did too. You took Goyle seriously when I didn’t, and your attacks on him helped me realize that offensive spells wouldn’t work. I might not have gotten the charm going in time otherwise. So, I’d be a fool to act like what you could do might not help.”

“No offense, Harry,” said Ron with a hint of a smile, “but there have been times when—“

”Yes, thank you, Ron,” said Harry dryly. “I appreciate that.”

“I appreciate your attitude about this, Harry,” said Hermione, a little more seriously. “It’s surprisingly sensible. We thought we would have to have a big fight with you.”

Harry wondered whether that would have happened if not for Dumbledore’s warning. “Looks like Neville’s timing was pretty good,” he said. “After you’ve just helped save my life doesn’t seem like a good time to be telling you that you shouldn’t help me. And Neville... you can still come over here and be physically affectionate with me if you want to.”

The others all laughed. Neville got up, walked around the backs of the chairs to behind Harry, and put his hands on Harry's shoulders, trying to get around Fawkes. He patted Harry's shoulders a few times, saying "Thanks for not being a pain about this," then stayed around to pet Fawkes.

"Seems like the least I can do," said Harry.

"I have an idea," said Ron. "We've still got lots of time to kill, even before lunch. Why don't Neville and Harry practice dueling a bit, then you two can start teaching us the stuff the Aurors taught you, about real dueling."

Neville and Harry agreed, and they got up and started. Before long, half the people in the common room were watching, or trying to learn what Harry and Neville had learned. The rest of the morning passed very quickly.

As the days passed, Harry found his protection to be less annoying than he had thought it would be. Since his friends were with him much of the time anyway, he was often able to forget that they were there for another reason. A few things were different, such as that now when the Gryffindor team had a Quidditch practice, Neville and Hermione flew around the perimeter of the Quidditch pitch, alert for anything unusual. No one's schedule was free enough to watch Harry during the classes he taught, so Hermione contented herself with charming Harry's map, and the others as well, so that if Crabbe or Malfoy came within ten yards of Harry from eight o'clock to twelve o'clock the maps would make a loud noise.

Pansy was pleased that the others were taking such an active role in keeping Harry safe. She reported that Goyle's death had only intensified Malfoy's desire to kill Harry, but that other than expressing his wish for Harry's death, Malfoy was saying nothing about how it might be accomplished, or what he was thinking of doing. "Somebody must've given him a lecture about security," Pansy had said to Harry. "He used to talk more, but now he isn't saying anything." She added that she was being careful not to appear to be prying too hard.

She also said that she felt it would not be easy for Malfoy to do anything obvious, because the dynamic in Slytherin had changed even more. She said that only she and Crabbe made any pretense anymore of supporting Malfoy. The seventh years kept their distance from him, she said, and most of the fifth years and younger students were outspoken in their opposition to him, even to the point of the first years keeping him and Crabbe under surveillance in unsubtle ways. Harry hoped they wouldn't be in danger from that, but Pansy assured him that there was strength in numbers, and that Malfoy no longer cared about what anyone thought of him. She said he knew that if he put one toe out of line he would be expelled, and didn't want to risk it.

Harry noticed that Hermione spent less time around him than the others did; she was often gone, and he assumed she was in the library, because of her heavy class load. Ginny made up for it by spending much more time around him, causing him to wonder about the situation with her fifth year friends. She told him that she had a talk with them and told them that while she wanted to spend time with them, that Harry's protection had to be a priority. She said they understood and didn't take offense, which Harry was glad to hear. "They want you kept alive too, Harry," Ginny had told him. "Especially after Goyle... they saw that with their own eyes. I think attempts on your life that they read or hear about are one thing, but seeing it is something else. It's not only them, but all the Gryffindors, and a lot from the other houses. I think everyone's keeping their eyes open for anything that seems like a threat. So, I'd say you've got most of the school looking out for you." Harry found it hard to imagine that he could be in danger considering that, but he knew enough not to be overconfident, that Voldemort's reach was often longer than he thought.

Harry thoroughly enjoyed his Saturday Auror training sessions, and was making substantial progress. His dueling was getting better, to the point where he was able to fight a few of the Aurors to a virtual draw; a few of the bouts got to be as long as five minutes. He also continued improving with the anti-Disapparation

field; as of mid-February, there were four Aurors who could not Disapparate once he put up the field. The four started referring to themselves as the “Potter club,” and were sure that their membership would grow quickly. Naturally, a continuing betting pool started, centered around guessing which Aurors would be the next to join the club.

On a rainy Friday evening in mid-February, Harry, Ron, Neville, and Ginny were sitting in the Gryffindor common room, doing homework and talking occasionally. All except Neville were a bit on edge because the second Quidditch matches were to be held the next day; Gryffindor would play Hufflepuff first, then Ravenclaw would play Slytherin.

“I just hope it stops raining,” Ron was saying. “Bad enough to practice in rain...”

Neville nodded. “I don’t see how you can play in rain,” he said. “It’s hard enough for Hermione and I just to do our patrols when you practice in the rain. We can’t see a whole lot.”

“We’ll beat them, whether it rains or not,” said Ginny confidently.

“I think so too, of course, but they’re pretty good,” pointed out Ron. “Remember, they were pasting Ravenclaw when Cho got the Snitch last time. If that was any indication, I’ll have my hands full.”

“Don’t worry, Ron, we’ll try to keep possession long enough to give you a rest,” said Ginny. “Besides, the Ravenclaw Keeper isn’t as good as you are. He let in twelve out of twenty-one attempts. You only let in one out of eight. They won’t be getting twelve goals off of us.”

Ron turned a bit red, and said nothing as Ginny smiled at him, partly with pride and partly enjoying his embarrassment. Harry exchanged a smile with her. “That’s right, Ron,” he said. “In fact, I think it’s going to be a shutout. I bet they don’t get a single goal off of you.”

With an annoyed smile, Ron gave Harry a ‘be serious’ look. Neville added, “If we were Aurors, there’d already be a betting pool on the outcome of the game, and probably the score as well.” Harry chuckled.

“I’m pretty sure that gambling isn’t allowed at Hogwarts,” pointed out Ron. “I think I read it in the rules.”

“You think? You’re not sure?” asked Ginny.

Ron shrugged. “When you become a prefect, you’re supposed to read the Hogwarts rule book, and memorize as much of it as you can. I read most of it, but I didn’t bother trying to remember anything, because—“

”You knew that Hermione would be around, and you could always ask her,” finished Ginny. Ron nodded. “What are you going to do once you graduate, and she’s not around all the time to remember stuff for you?”

Harry and Neville chuckled as Ron looked up with mild indignation. “I remember the stuff I need to remember,” he said. “It’s just that she remembers unimportant stuff really well. I don’t put much of a priority on remembering whether gambling is allowed at Hogwarts or not.”

“Ron,” she said, “what’s the record for the fastest capture of a Snitch in professional Quidditch?”

“Three and a half seconds, of course. Why?”

She smirked. “Seems like you remember unimportant stuff just fine.”

He rolled his eyes. “C’mon, Ginny, that’s one of the most famous Quidditch records there is. It’s right up there with Bruno Burnansky’s streak of sixty-two consecutive successful goal attempts, or Paolo Renai’s twenty-five consecutive captures of the Snitch. If you’re a Quidditch fan, you can’t not know that.”

She was unmoved. “I bet there’s lots more trivial stuff about Quidditch that you can remember just fine,” she said. Ron smiled a little and didn’t answer.

Harry heard a murmur spread throughout the room, and looked up. He saw Dumbledore’s golden dog approach him, stand on its two hind legs, and lick his

face. The other three chuckled, as they all knew what it meant. “How did it get in here?” Harry asked.

“It just seemed to walk through the wall,” said Katie Bell, sitting across the room from him. “I happened to be looking in that direction. What is it, anyway?”

“It’s from Dumbledore, it means he wants to see me,” he explained. He gave the dog a quick hug, then got up. “It seems to really like you,” she said, smiling.

“I like it, too,” he answered. “Funny, I never thought to wonder whether it was a he or a she. I guess it doesn’t need to have a gender.”

“Or, maybe it’s male because Dumbledore is,” suggested Ginny.

Harry shrugged as he walked across the room to the portrait hole. As it opened, the dog leaped up and through the hole. Harry followed it to Dumbledore’s office, where the door was already open.

“Harry, thank you,” greeted Dumbledore. Harry sat down opposite him. “Are you all ready for the Quidditch match?”

Harry knew that Dumbledore was just being polite, mentioning something that he knew Harry would be thinking about. “Yes, sir,” he said. “We were just talking about it in the common room.” He went on to relate the conversation.

Dumbledore chuckled. “Yes, the Aurors are well known for that,” he agreed. “And Ron is correct, gambling is not allowed at Hogwarts. Not so much because it is morally objectionable, but because it is considered an adult vice. One must employ a certain amount of self-control, which even some adults fail to do.” Harry thought of Ludo Bagman.

“I wanted to let you know, Harry, that tomorrow will be a Hogsmeade day.” Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Not a weekend,” Dumbledore continued, “but just a day. It has been decided that until Voldemort is no longer a threat, students will still be able to visit Hogsmeade periodically, but the days will be one at a time, and not announced in advance. There will also be heavy security. The Hogsmeade visit will be announced after the second Quidditch match. Of course,

people will have been unable to plan their day, but I felt that this was a reasonable balance of security and normalcy.”

“I’m glad to hear that, sir,” said Harry. He didn’t think it was right that the students should never be able to go to Hogsmeade. “It sounds like there shouldn’t be any problems. I’ll be going too, of course.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I hoped, and to be honest, expected, that you would. The symbolism would be unfortunate if you did not. It remains to be seen how many will choose to go. When I make the announcement, I will emphasize the heavy security.”

“I think a lot will go,” said Harry. “I think they’ll see it the same way I do.”

“It would not surprise me,” Dumbledore agreed. “Much of the school has come to see things the same way you do. They certainly have embraced the challenge of your security.”

“It’s kind of ironic, really,” Harry mused. “I can take care of myself better than any other student, and I have everyone looking out for me anyway.”

“You can take care of yourself better than most teachers, too, I suspect,” said Dumbledore. “That is not exactly the issue, of course. Which reminds me, Kingsley mentioned to me the existence of the ‘Potter club.’ You must be proud.”

“Yes, and kind of embarrassed for the members,” he admitted. “I hope they’re not embarrassed, but they don’t seem to be.”

“There is no reason they should be, Harry, as you are so clearly exceptional. Kingsley said that he expects that by the time you are twenty, perhaps sooner, the whole complement of Aurors will be members.”

Harry shook his head in wonder; that was quite a statement. “Sir, that reminds me, I was wondering... I’ve gotten so much stronger this year, I’m really surprised. I’m way stronger than I ever expected to be. Why do you think that is? Am I that good, just naturally? Is it from the curse when I was a baby, did I get power equivalent to Voldemort’s? I mean, I’ve been working really hard, but this is a bit much.”

“Yes, Harry, I must admit, even I have been surprised at the speed of your progress. I can only guess at the reasons, of course. Firstly, your motivation is at its highest, both because of the attempts on your life and your knowledge of the prophecy. Such pressure, burdensome though it is, will tend to bring out the full extent of your talent. Secondly, the attempts on your life and the Voldemort dream attacks not only increased your motivation, but your ability to focus, which has always been a strength of yours. You recall what I said in the first week’s Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson about the importance of mental elements of spellcasting, and your experience is tending to give evidence of that. Your ability to focus is highly developed, better than that of almost all wizards.”

Harry, smiling, cut in with, “I can think of at least one who it’s not better than.”

Dumbledore smiled back, and continued. “Thirdly, it is well established that the years between the ages of sixteen and eighteen are, for wizards, the time during which one’s natural skills develop most strongly. And lastly, and I think most importantly, it is not only your focus which is important, but your type of focus. During the Voldemort trial, you developed the habit of focusing on love, and that is what got you through that, and was the basis for your new spell. Your new spell is based on the energy of love. But I suspect that you have used that energy not only for that spell, but for all your spells.”

Harry nodded. “I just got in the habit of doing that. It’s kind of unconscious now, but at some point, I just started focusing on that particular energy whenever I did magic. So, you think that’s what makes my magic so strong?”

“I am almost certain of it. It has given me a new perspective, in fact. You know, of course, that despite my age I am considered to be one of the strongest wizards in the world. I have always simply assumed that it was a natural ability, combined with much study. But your experience is teaching me something: I am now realizing that my own magic has always been based on the energy of love, and I simply did not know it, at least in those terms. But it makes perfect sense.”

Harry was impressed, and had to agree. “It does make sense... especially considering that I only have this because of you. You taught me what love was, when I had no idea. I’m not surprised that your magic is based on it as well. Also, you’re the only one who can also do my spell, and you learned it very quickly.”

“As we have noted, love is a ‘power the Dark Lord knows not,’” agreed Dumbledore.

“But I still don’t understand something, then... remember, it’s ‘the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord...’ I assume we agree that the word ‘one’ means I’m the only one?” Dumbledore nodded. “But then it can’t be just that my magic is from the energy of love, because yours is like that, too. Wouldn’t that suggest that whatever it is about me is something that I can do and you can’t?”

Dumbledore considered. “Perhaps, but it may also be that it is something that you will do that I will not. For example, you are the one who discovered the spell. We do not know whether I could have done it, just that I did not. It is very difficult to say.

“You realize what this means, Harry. Considering all your progress, and all that has happened, I find it highly likely that a time will come when you are as strong a wizard as I am.”

Harry was dumbstruck. He had never thought about it in those terms. It just seemed like an unreachable goal. “That’s... an amazing thought, sir,” he finally managed. “It’s hard to believe. But to tell you the truth, I’d rather be as good a person as you are than as strong a wizard.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Thank you, Harry. But you may already be that. I talked to Molly after vacation, and she was positively smitten with you. It has been a long time since I made anybody as happy as you made her with your card and your affection.”

“I’m glad I made her so happy, but that’s not what I meant. You have lots of compassion, you care about everybody, whether they deserve it or not. You wouldn’t have...” Harry paused, thinking. “I never felt especially bad about Goyle’s

death. I mean, I wasn't happy about it, but... it just didn't affect me. I watched him die, you'd think it would. I just think you would have reacted differently."

"You feel badly about yourself that you reacted as you did," observed Dumbledore. Harry nodded. "You should not castigate yourself for that. The circumstances were highly unusual. You had just recovered from a very emotionally trying incident less than two weeks prior, and then you were subjected to yet another attempt. I do not wish to overemphasize the point, but you are still only sixteen years old. I cannot say how I would have reacted to such a trial at the age of sixteen, but I doubt that I would have handled it any better than you have. I have not always been as I am now, Harry. To expect such a thing of yourself is not reasonable."

Harry wondered if this was how Ernie had felt after Hogsmeade; whether the expectation was reasonable or not, he felt it anyway. He also wondered if he would have this expectation of himself if not for Dumbledore's example. "I know... I just... feel like maybe I'm not such a good person if I'm not sorry that he died. I mean, I wish it hadn't happened, but... you know what I mean."

"You are already a very good person. He tried to kill you. He may have been under the Imperius Curse, but you and I both believe that he would have been willing to do it voluntarily if he thought he could have gotten away. We can still pity him, as he may have ended up very differently had his father not been a Death Eater. But given the totality of the situation, again, you are expecting too much of yourself."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate that you think I'm a good person anyway."

"You're welcome. On another subject, I thought you should know that Voldemort's followers have done what we assumed they would at some point: they have started killing Muggles. Three were killed earlier today. We have little doubt that there will be more."

Harry shook his head in disgust. "What's the point of killing random Muggles?"

Dumbledore looked at him sadly. “They simply enjoy killing. From their point of view, killing Muggles is safer than killing wizards, who could perhaps fight back.”

“That’s more incentive for me to keep up the pace of my training,” Harry said. “The sooner Voldemort’s stopped, the more people, especially Muggles, will stay alive.”

Dumbledore nodded somberly. “Very true. In a way, it is fortunate that this did not start sooner than it did. I would have expected it to.”

They were both silent for a moment. Then Harry said, “So, is the magic-detection field going to be up tomorrow?”

“Of course; I know you are thinking of what is best for Pansy. Yes, we will maintain the fiction that it was a standard security measure.”

“Good. Thank you, sir.” He stood to leave. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” Dumbledore inclined his head, and Harry left. He felt he had much more to think about now than tomorrow’s Quidditch match.

Fortunately for the Quidditch players, Saturday morning was sunny, if cold. Harry sat with the team in the Great Hall, Neville and Hermione nearby. They probably would be anyway, Harry thought, but he knew they were here now as his security detail. Halfway through his breakfast, he saw three familiar figures enter the Great Hall and head towards him. He smiled and got up to greet them.

Tonks said hello to Harry, then moved off to greet Neville as Winston Clark approached, proffering his hand. “I haven’t been here in quite a few years,” he said as Harry shook it. “Looks much the same, really. Peeves still here?”

“Yes,” Harry chuckled, “still causing mayhem. Which is sort of his job, I suppose.”

“Good. Actually, I asked for this assignment, mostly so I could say hello to my daughter. I assume she’ll be along when she sees us over here.”

Harry shook the hand of the third Auror, a dark-haired wizard in his late twenties named Teddy Wirshire. “Hi, Teddy,” said Harry. “Thanks for coming.”

“No problem, Harry. Like Winston says, it’s good to see the place again.”

“I assume you three are also on Hogsmeade duty?”

Teddy nodded. “Ten of us altogether, including two in the Three Broomsticks at all times. But no butterbeer for us, I’m afraid.”

“Why not?” asked Harry, curious. It seemed harmless enough, if they wanted to.

“Well, we can’t be running off to the bathroom all the time,” Teddy explained, as Winston nodded.

“You have to go sometime,” Harry said reasonably.

“Didn’t they tell you, Harry?” asked Tonks. “One of the requirements to be an Auror is that you have to be able to not go to the bathroom for eight hours at a time.” Winston and Teddy laughed, but in a way that Harry felt suggested they thought there was some truth to what she said.

“Hmmm... maybe I didn’t think through this business of wanting to be an Auror as well as I should have,” said Harry, to more laughter.

Winston and Teddy stepped over to say hello to Neville, as Tonks approached Hermione and put a friendly arm on her shoulder. “Hermione. You did good,” Tonks said simply.

Hermione smiled happily. “Thanks, Tonks. I think so too.” Harry saw Neville blush as he heard this.

“Dad!” Harry heard, and turned to see Helen Clark run up and hug her father. “Hi, honey,” he said, smiling. “He still your best teacher?”

“Of course,” she said, as if to even ask the question was silly. “You should see all the stuff I can do now. I can’t wait to show you over the summer. But I’m glad you’re here, I get to have my two favorite men here together.” The other Aurors and Harry’s friends chuckled.

Winston affected a worried look. “I’m kind of afraid to ask which is your most favorite. I mean, I don’t have a Chocolate Frog card.”

Harry and the others laughed, and Helen looked at her father, annoyed. “Da-ad,” she said, stretching the word into two syllables. Winston smiled and mussed her hair.

Ron stood up. “Time to go, everyone,” he said. The team stood, and Harry moved off to join them, waving goodbye to the Aurors and Helen. They walked the length of the Gryffindor table, receiving cheers, and headed out towards the changing rooms.

There was a casual feeling in the changing areas. Ron looked tense, but not as tense as before the last game. When it was time to head out to the pitch, Ron simply said, “Okay, let’s go do it,” and they walked out toward the pitch.

They lined up on one side of the pitch, the Hufflepuffs on the other. The crowd finished filing in and taking their seats as Harry looked around. He could already see the three Aurors on their brooms, circling the pitch.

Dumbledore stepped forward and made a few announcements, including another mention of the magic-detection field. He also said that there would be an announcement at the end of the second match, and asked that no one leave until the announcement had been made. Madam Hooch then stepped forward, as the players moved to assume their standard starting positions, ready to take off.

“Captains, shake hands,” she said. Ron offered a friendly hand to the Hufflepuff captain, who returned the handshake in the same spirit. It’s so nice when we’re not playing the Slytherins, Harry thought. He started focusing on the Snitch, even though it had not been released yet.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and the Quaffle, the Bludgers, and the Snitch were all released as the players kicked off the ground, racing into the air. As he took off, Harry thought he had seen where the Snitch had gone. He shot off ahead and to the right, rather than straight up as usual.

Colin started his commentary. “Gryffindor takes possession right away, Creevey with the Quaffle, passes to Ginny, back to Creevey. Potter staying near the ground. Creevey maneuvering for position, passes behind him to Bell, who races for—POTTER HAS THE SNITCH!”, Colin practically screamed, as the whistle blew and Harry flew across the field triumphantly, the Snitch in his hand. “Gryffindor wins, by a score of one hundred and fifty to zero, in a match that took... twelve seconds! Unbelievable!” The crowd was cheering, but it was a bit subdued, as if they couldn’t quite believe it either.

Harry flew over to a stunned Ron, who was heading back towards the field. They landed together, and Harry slapped Ron on the back. “I said it would be a shutout, didn’t I?” Harry said, smiling broadly.

Ron smiled back, still amazed. “Yeah, well, I was kind of looking forward to, you know, playing Quidditch. But hey, I’ll take the win, believe me.”

“Very sporting of you, Ron,” replied Harry as the rest of the team moved in to congratulate him, with backslaps, hugs from Ginny and Katie, and expressions of amazement. They started to walk off the field, chatting happily.

“Harry Potter, would you come up here, please?” asked Colin, to a few scattered laughs from the crowd. Ron said, “Hey, it should have been me! I held them to no goals, after all!” The rest of the team laughed as Harry headed towards where Colin was sitting.

Harry walked up the steps and sat down next to Colin. “The Star of the Match, Gryffindor Seeker Harry Potter,” he said. “Harry, I think I speak for everyone here when I say, how in the world did you do that?”

“I’m not sure, Colin, to tell you the truth. When the Snitch was let out, I thought I got a glimpse of its direction. It was really quick, like a tenth of a second, I was barely sure I saw it at all. But in Quidditch, a glimpse is often all you get, so I just took off in the direction I thought I saw it go. Then a few seconds later, I saw it again, and this time I was able to keep it in my sights.”

“Amazing, Harry. And is there anything you’d like to say to your fellow students, who you’ve just deprived of an hour’s entertainment?”

Harry laughed. “Yes, Ron mentioned that he had been looking forward to playing. But I reminded him that this is a shutout for him, so he’s not complaining. Other than that, I don’t know what to tell you, Colin.”

“Did it enter your mind before the game to make any unusual effort to catch the Snitch very early on?”

“No, I had intended to fly straight up and do my usual search. I just grabbed at what small opportunity I had, when I got it.”

“Not so small an opportunity after all, Harry. Is there anything else you’d like to say, before I let you go?”

“Yes, Colin... I’d like to welcome the new Slytherin Seeker, Thomas Dalton, to the pitch and wish him well. It’s too bad that I couldn’t have played against him last time.” The crowd laughed at the implied comment, as the Slytherins applauded for Thomas. “And I’d like to say thank you to my friend Cho Chang for her support of me last time we were here. I want to wish both of them good luck.” The crowd applauded.

“Well, they can’t both have good luck, Harry, but I know what you mean,” said Colin, again getting a mild laugh. “Do you have a rooting interest in the next match? I mean, if Slytherin wins, it would put Gryffindor in a commanding position to win the Quidditch Cup. Gryffindor could lose the next match to Ravenclaw, but still win the Cup, if the goal differential favored Gryffindor, as it does substantially at this moment. Your thoughts?”

Harry knew that, whatever his true feelings, he couldn’t state a preference, so he settled for something close to the truth. “You’re right, Colin, we could win the Cup like that, but I’d hate to win the Cup by losing the match next time. We’d only feel really good about it if we won the match as well, and I don’t want to root for someone else to lose so we can win. If we’re the best team, we should win all three

matches. So, no, from the point of view of winning the Cup, I don't have a preference for who wins the next match."

"Quite a sporting spirit there. The Star of the Match, Harry Potter. Thank you, Harry," Colin finished, as the crowd applauded, even most Hufflepuffs. Harry headed back down to the field.

As he crossed the field, he encountered the Ravenclaw team starting to take their positions prior to the match. He greeted them as he saw them, and stopped with Cho. "That was very nice of you, Harry," she said. "Both about me, and not having a preference. But, honestly, you'd prefer Slytherin won, wouldn't you?"

He shrugged. "I didn't want to state a preference publicly, it wouldn't have seemed right. But honestly, either outcome is okay with me. If Slytherin wins, Colin's right, it's good for us. But if you win, I'll be happy for my friend, the Ravenclaw Seeker. And really, I'll be rooting for you. I was telling the truth, we should have to win next time to win the Cup. I don't mind that."

She smiled brilliantly, and Harry was momentarily reminded of why he had been so attracted to her. "Thank you, Harry, I appreciate it. It means a lot to me that you'll be rooting for me." He nodded and smiled, and headed back to his teammates.

"Very diplomatic of you, Harry," greeted Katie as he joined them. Harry realized that she was referring to the interview, not his conversation with Cho, which Katie couldn't have heard.

"It was more or less the truth," he answered. "I'm not going to be happy unless we win next time."

"Well, I'm not very diplomatic," said Ron. "I want Slytherin to win, but not pick anything up on the goal differential. That way, even if Slytherin beats Hufflepuff next time—which they won't—we'd very likely beat them on goal differential. And we've got a huge goal differential lead over Ravenclaw, no way they're making that up today, or next time. So a Slytherin win means the Cup is nearly ours."

Harry could understand that, but asked, “Are you really going to be happy if we win the Cup even though we lose the match next time?”

“Let’s put it this way, Harry, I’ll be happier to lose the match but win the Cup than I’ll be if we lose the match and lose the Cup. I mean, I hate to admit it, but Hermione was a little bit right about luck. I mean, twelve seconds... that was because you’re a good Seeker, no question. But it almost has to happen eventually that the Snitch pops up near the other Seeker and we lose. The percentages are going to catch up with us. So, I’d rather be in as good a position as possible if that happens.”

“Well, let’s just hope that the percentages stay with us for four more matches, anyway,” responded Harry. Saying it made him a bit nostalgic in advance, knowing that he would only play Quidditch at Hogwarts four more times.

They watched the players for both teams get set and the captains shake hands. Madam Hooch blew the whistle, and they took off. Harry listened to Colin’s commentary.

“And they’re off, Ravenclaw takes possession, it’s Corner with the Quaffle, passes to Boot, back to Corner, who dives a bit to avoid a Crabbe Bludger. Corner passes back to—intercepted by Warrington, over to Puce,, who has a clear shot, he shoots and... saved by Hilton! Nice save there by the Ravenclaw Keeper, who passes it out to his teammates. Corner has it again, he’s being heavily defended, can’t find an open Chaser, he has to back off and circle back for a better chance. He approaches again, dumps off a pass behind him to—Chang dives! Over in the corner at the Slytherin end, she flattens out and... she has the Snitch! Oh, my! Ravenclaw wins, again by a score of one hundred fifty to zero! And that match took... twenty-eight seconds!”

As the crowd cheered, Harry, Ron, and Ginny looked at each other in amazement. Impressed, Ginny said, “See, Harry, look at how you inspire others to follow your example.”

Harry chuckled, as Ron said, “I wish Dalton had been the one to get inspired.”

“Well, it’s his first match, he’s not going to be finding the Snitch in twenty-eight seconds,” said Katie. “Very impressive from Cho, though. I always saw her as an average Seeker, but she did great today.”

“Wonder who’s going to be the Star of the Match,” said Dennis facetiously.

“Well, Hilton did have a shutout, and one save, which is more than I had,” said Ron in the same spirit. “He seems like a good candidate—“

”Cho Chang, would you come up here please?” asked Colin over the loudspeakers. “Well, I was wrong,” said Ron. “Imagine that.” Harry was interested to see what Cho would say.

“Congratulations, Cho. Quite an amazing day of Quidditch, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes, I would, Colin,” she agreed. “I can’t quite believe it myself. I’d like to apologize to the crowd, who came out here but didn’t get to see much Quidditch.”

“What we saw is remarkable enough, Cho, I don’t think most people will mind. Let me ask you the same question I asked Harry, how did you do that?”

“I don’t know what to say, Colin, except that I started looking, as usual, and there it was, down in the corner. I went for it, and fortunately, it didn’t move away before I could catch it.”

“We all know how good a Seeker Harry is, Cho. Were you pleased that you accomplished more or less the same thing he did?”

“Actually, Colin, the fact is that it took me more than twice as long as it did him to find the Snitch, so I hope to do better next time. Seriously,” she added as the crowd chuckled, “I’ve never even found the Snitch that fast in practice. I could probably play another hundred matches and it wouldn’t happen. Just one of those things.”

“You play Gryffindor next time, and the winner will take the Quidditch Cup. How do you see your prospects against them?”

“We’ll definitely be the underdogs, Colin. They’re a very good team—they’ve won the last two Quidditch Cups—and their Seeker is pretty amazing. We’re just going to do the best we can. It’ll be a tough match, no doubt.”

“Thank you, Cho. The Star of the Match, Cho Chang. Thank you, everyone, and we should be hearing the announcement from Professor Dumbledore soon.” Colin put down the microphone.

“You are pretty amazing, Harry,” said Ginny, patting him on the shoulder. Harry grinned embarrassedly.

“Yes, you really are, Harry,” grinned Ron, who Harry rewarded with an annoyed look.

Dumbledore spoke, his voice amplified. “Thank you, Mr. Creevey. At this time I wish to announce that students third year and above may visit Hogsmeade today.” A buzz went through the crowd. “There will be a strong security presence in the village; a number of Aurors will be present all day long. Students must return to the castle by 5:00 p.m. This announcement is being made at the last minute due to security considerations. There will be future Hogsmeade visits; they will consist of one day of a weekend, as is the case today, and they will not be announced until the morning of the day in question.

“This was not an easy decision to make, in view of the events of Halloween day. But we cannot live under siege, out of fear, and the heavy security will make any repeat of that attack very unlikely. That is all; thank you for your attention.”

Harry looked around; nobody said anything for a moment. Ron and Ginny had already known; the others looked surprised, and Dennis looked uncomfortable. “Are you going to go, Harry?” Dennis asked.

“Of course, Dennis. How about you?”

“I don’t know,” he said, looking down. “I’ll talk to my friends, see what they think. We were all there, we all lost a friend. It’s kind of hard, especially with no notice.”

“That may be a good thing, Dennis,” said Ron. “This way, you can make a quick decision and just go do it. You don’t have to think and worry about it for weeks in advance.”

Dennis nodded, but still looked uncertain. “That’s true. Also, Colin said that I should go back there as soon as I can, so I can replace that memory of Hogsmeade with a better one. I suppose he’s right, but to be honest, I felt like it was easy for him to say, he wasn’t there.”

Harry looked at Dennis earnestly. “If it makes you feel any better, Dennis... I’ve been through worse situations, more than once, and Colin’s right. You’re not going to feel any differently about it until you go back.”

Dennis gave him a shy smile. “This is the problem with having Harry Potter as a teacher and a teammate... if I look at you as an example, there’s no brave thing I can get out of doing, because I know you would do it.”

Harry nodded in acknowledgment of the compliment, and said, “You need to do what’s best for you, Dennis, not what you think I would do.”

Dennis reluctantly said, “I have a feeling that what’s best for me is what you would do, and not only in this situation. Well, I’ll talk to my friends, see what we decide.”

Harry and Ron exchanged a glance which communicated that they expected to see him and his friends in Hogsmeade. Then Harry said, “Oh, I forgot something. Go on ahead, I’ll catch up with you in the changing rooms.” He ran off to where Colin was sitting, and picked up the microphone. “Excuse me... would Ernie Macmillan, Anthony Goldstein, and Thomas Dalton meet me on the field, please? Thank you.”

The three surprised prefects met him as he asked. “Thanks... I wondered if you three would meet me at just before 5:00 at the school gates. There’s something I need your help with.”

Harry was determined to have an enjoyable Hogsmeade day, and he did. He suggested to Hermione and Neville that they spend some time alone, and as he expected, he was rebuffed. “It’s good of you to suggest it, Harry,” Neville had said, “and I think that Ron and Ginny can keep you safe enough, not to mention ten Aurors. But we just wouldn’t feel comfortable. We find ways to be alone sometimes, but just right now, we want to be with the rest of you.”

The Aurors were a comforting presence. Harry knew all of them, of course, and found himself wanting to chat, but he knew better—they were on duty, and couldn’t allow themselves to be distracted. He did have smiles for Tonks and Winston, who nodded their acknowledgment without taking their eyes off their surroundings.

They spent an hour and a half in the Three Broomsticks, as much for the principle of it as anything else; they wanted to be seen there. As with the last Hogsmeade weekend, Harry visited several tables, talking to students from his classes. An hour into the visit, he looked up and saw the four surviving Gryffindor third years come in. He walked over, bought them a round of butterbeers, and joined them for ten minutes.

The five of them stopped at almost every shop in Hogsmeade, including Zonko’s this time. Ron found himself disappointed, as though it had somehow lost its appeal in a way he hadn’t expected. He was not at all comforted by Hermione’s suggestion that it meant he was growing up and becoming too mature for practical jokes. He pointed to the one that Dumbledore had played on Fred and George; she responded that it was funny precisely because of its rarity. Ron looked unhappy, and Harry felt that it was because Ron knew she was right. Harry knew how Ron felt; he had argued with Hermione enough to know that it was frustrating to argue with someone who always seemed to end up being right.

As it got dark later in the afternoon, Harry suggested they walk down to the end of the road. As they did, Hermione asked him if it was because of what happened the last time.

“Yes, I think so,” he answered. “It’s kind of like what I was saying to Dennis, it’s good to do the same things we did before, so we feel it doesn’t have to happen that way.”

“Should we tell Neville the story of what happened with Sirius?” joked Ron.

“Yeah, that was a pretty good story, Harry,” added Neville. “I especially liked the part where Snape had a fit at the end of it, that he knew you did it but couldn’t prove it.”

“Careful, Neville, or I’ll give you my little talk on Schadenfreude.”

“What’s... that?” asked Neville, who had clearly considered trying to pronounce the word and then decided not to bother.

Harry was about to explain, but Hermione said, “It’s a German word, it means being happy when bad things happen to others. But what do you mean by ‘my little talk?’”

He shook his head. “Is there anything you don’t know, Hermione?” She said nothing but looked pleased. He explained what had happened months ago in his class of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff second years.

Ron didn’t scoff, but Harry thought he wanted to. “I think you’re expecting a bit much of twelve-year-olds,” he said.

“I didn’t think they were never going to do it again,” Harry pointed out. “I just wanted to be sure they knew that it wasn’t good.”

“Well, I think it was very farsighted and mature of Harry to explain that to them,” said Hermione.

Ron snorted. “Imagine my surprise.” Ginny and Neville chuckled.

Hermione whirled on Neville. “Did you just laugh? He was making fun of me!”

Harry immediately decided that he was staying out of this. Ron, however, said, “What, just because he’s your boyfriend, it means he has to agree with everything you say? If that’s true, that must be the reason I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Hermione looked at him with distaste; Harry couldn't tell whether it was feigned or genuine. "Ron, if you'll get me a five-foot-long parchment scroll, I'll make a list of reasons you don't have a girlfriend."

Harry raised his eyebrows a little, as Ron gave Hermione a disdainful look. "Sorry, Ron," said Ginny, "but you walked right into that one." This observation did not appear to make Ron feel any better.

"But thanks for taking the heat off me, Ron," said Neville wryly.

"I think you're about to find the heat's back on you, Neville," said Ginny. "You should have kept quiet and let the two of them argue. She might have forgotten she was annoyed at you."

Neville shook his head. "No chance. I know enough by now to know that. In addition to being extremely intelligent, Hermione also has an excellent memory. She might have let it go, but she wasn't going to forget."

Hermione was now trying to appear annoyed at Neville, but his compliments had softened her. He put his arm around her waist, and she reciprocated. "I still wish you hadn't laughed," she said.

Neville nodded. "I know. But it wasn't mean-spirited, I would have been upset if it was. Ron was just pointing out that your reaction to what Harry said was predictable. What you said about him and girlfriends was much worse."

Ginny nodded. "Sorry, Hermione, but he's right. It was right on the edge between a friendly put-down and being nasty."

Hermione sighed. "Come on, he knows I didn't really mean that."

"The problem is," replied Ginny, "that there's just enough truth in it to hurt a bit."

"Hey!" exclaimed Ron. Harry wanted to laugh, but didn't.

"Come on, Ron, it's true," said Ginny, not backing down. "I don't mean, and I don't think Hermione does either, that you couldn't have a girlfriend if you wanted to. I'm sure you could find someone. But the fact is that you have this gruffness, this... being contrary, sometimes insensitive, I'm not sure what to call it."

But I do know that girls aren't going to find it appealing, though they might tolerate it. Now, the way you were with Harry, after the department store, that was wonderful. We hardly ever see that side of you, and if you showed it more often, girls would be chasing after you. It's too bad that it only comes out under extreme duress."

Ron said nothing in response to this; Harry figured that it was because this was exactly the sort of topic Ron didn't like to talk about. Hermione, though, seemed to be bothered at the idea that she had hurt Ron. She looked at Ron apologetically. "Ron, we're always trading comments like that, but I feel bad. I didn't mean it to come across like that. I'm really sorry. But you know I wouldn't hurt you deliberately, don't you?"

Ron looked as though he was still unhappy with her, but didn't feel it was right to say so, because she had already apologized. As he looked at her, his expression softened, and he nodded. "I know. Don't worry about it." Hermione's expression suggested that she was still worried about it, however. She didn't say anything more, but she put an arm around Ron's waist momentarily and squeezed in further apology.

"It's getting close to five o'clock," said Ginny. "We should head on back."

Recognizing that it was now safe to speak again, Harry said, "Okay, but we have to stop at the Three Broomsticks first, remember." They headed off together.

When in the Three Broomsticks, Harry had asked Madam Rosemerta to set aside eighty bottles of butterbeer, in four crates. She had done so, Harry had paid, and now he left the Three Broomsticks with the four crates hovering at his side, moving as he did.

When they reached the Hogwarts gates, they met the three prefects Harry had talked to after the Quidditch match. "Thanks for meeting me," said Harry, taking in their surprised looks on seeing the crates. "I needed your help, since I can't go into your common rooms. I'd like each of you to take one of these crates back

with you, and give them to the first and second years, since they can't come to Hogsmeade."

The prefects looked impressed. "Thanks, Harry," said Ernie. "I'm sure they'll appreciate it. I know I would have, in my first year. Why are you doing this?"

"Exactly the reason you just said, Ernie. I would have appreciated it too. They don't have to feel so left out. And I can afford it, so why not." Ernie nodded his understanding, and they headed back to the castle, each prefect causing one crate to hover alongside him.