

## CHAPTER 19

# RON'S BIRTHDAY

Harry woke up at his usual time on a Thursday, two weeks later. He was unusually conscious of what day it was because it was the first of March, which was Ron's birthday. It was important for two reasons: one was that it was Ron's seventeenth birthday, which was a very special one for a wizard. Ron was now 'of age,' meaning that he was an adult for all legal and practical purposes, and could learn to Apparate. Ron had been looking forward to that for a long time, but would not be able to get his license until the summer.

The second reason that it was important, at least from Harry's point of view, was that this was the day he had arranged to have Ron's Firebolt delivered. Harry was a little nervous, because while in Diagon Alley Ron had indicated that he was tempted to allow Harry to buy it for him, he had never given explicit approval. Harry thought Ron would be happy, but he was still concerned.

As Harry climbed out of bed, he noticed that Ron had already left the dormitory. Harry changed into his normal robes and headed to the portrait hole, where he met Ginny, heading out as well. They smiled at each other in anticipation of what was to come.

"You going to sit with us?" Harry asked.

"Are you kidding? Of course," she said as they climbed through the hole and started walking towards the Great Hall. "I want to see his face. You have the note that Mum wrote, right?"

Harry took it out to double-check. "Right here," he said. "I don't want his enjoyment of it to be spoiled by his wondering what she'd think."

“Well, let’s hurry up,” she said, walking more briskly. “We don’t want to miss it. I know the owls never come this early, but still...”

They took their seats, Harry his usual one next to Neville and across from Ron and Hermione, while Ginny took a seat next to Neville. “Happy birthday, Ron,” said Harry. Ron nodded his thanks, and said to Ginny, “You’re sitting with us today?”

“Of course. After all, how often does your older brother turn seventeen?”

“For you, this’ll be the sixth time,” Ron pointed out.

She shrugged. “I hadn’t thought of it that way, but somehow it seems more important now... maybe because I’m not that far from seventeen myself. Just another year and a half.”

“I’ll admit I’m pretty excited about it,” said Ron. “Not that it does me a whole lot of good right now, since I’m here and can’t Apparate anyway, but Dad’s promised me that the day after I get back for summer vacation, he’ll go with me to the Apparation Test Center so I can get my license.”

“And then you’ll move from room to room by Apparating, not by walking, right?”

“No, I’m not going to do that,” he said. “I know all the stories, how some wizards just stopped walking when they could Apparate, and got into bad physical condition because they never used their legs. Personally, I think those are just horror stories the Apparation Test Center tells you to make sure you don’t do it too much. I don’t think that could really happen to anyone.”

“Oh, no, Ron, it really does happen, it’s well documented,” said Hermione. “For example, there was a man in Edinburgh...” she trailed off as she saw his expression, then finished, “...whose story I’m sure you’re not interested in hearing.” She took another bite of her food as the others laughed, including Ron.

“That usually doesn’t stop you,” Ron pointed out.

“Today’s your birthday,” she replied, patting him on the face deliberately to annoy him. He gently swatted her hand away in pretended annoyance.

“Ah,” he said, in a tone that suggested that she had been caught. “You won’t go into endless detail now because it’s my birthday, but every other day of the year, you don’t mind, even though you know I don’t care.”

“Well, I do it naturally, you know that, but the fact that it annoys you is kind of a bonus, yes.”

Ron looked at Neville. “She must do that all the time with you, Neville. How do you stand it?” Harry knew he phrased the question that way to get back at Hermione for her last comment.

“Oh, she doesn’t do it to me, Ron. She likes me,” said a smiling Neville, as the rest burst out laughing, even Hermione, to Harry’s surprise. “No, seriously, I don’t mind at all. I learn a lot. For instance, did you know that in 1682, at the thirteenth Warlocks’ Convention...” Neville trailed off as the others laughed again.

“I’m glad I came over here this morning,” said Ginny, smiling at Neville. “Neville’s in good form.”

“Yes, he is,” said Hermione, leaning across the table to take Neville’s hand.

“Hey, now,” said Ron. “None of that at the table. It’s my birthday, after all.”

“They should do it if they want to. I think it’s nice,” said Ginny.

“Anyway, it’s not like they’re kissing or something,” added Harry, partly to annoy Ron a bit himself.

“That would be fine, too,” said Ginny. “Why not?”

Ron rolled his eyes as Hermione and Neville chuckled. “Be serious,” he said, taking another bite of his breakfast.

Harry was curious, and asked, “Where do you go if you want to do that, anyway? There’s not much privacy around here.”

“Oh, there are places,” said Hermione, still holding Neville’s hand. “I mean, there have always been couples at Hogwarts, and they’ve found many places over the years.”

Ginny gave Ron an evil grin. “And it’s not just kissing, either. Some people—“

”Ginny!” Ron almost shouted as the others laughed loudly. He looked at them distastefully, then said, “It’s Ron’s seventeenth birthday, so let’s annoy him even more than usual.”

“Anyway, Harry,” said Hermione after she finished laughing, “if you really want to know... I’ll tell you once you have a girlfriend.” Now the others chuckled at him.

Harry shook his head. “Just curious,” he said, hoping this branch of the topic would stop there. Just then, the owls flew into the Hall, and seven cards and small packages landed in front of Ron, followed by a long, thin one, wrapped in such a way as to make it obvious that it was a broom. Ron’s eyes were as wide as Harry had ever seen them.

“You didn’t—“ gaped Ron. Harry handed over the note he had made sure to bring to the table. “It’s from Mum,” Ron said, and read it out loud. “Dear Ron, It was sweet of you to decline Harry’s offer that day in Diagon Alley because of how I might feel. So, part of my gift to you is to give my blessing for Harry to do this. Your present broom can go to your sister. Happy birthday. Love, Mum.”

Ron still looked shocked. He took the package and ripped off the wrapping, looking at the broom as if it were a priceless treasure, from every angle. Harry was smiling broadly, greatly enjoying Ron’s pleasure. “You know that there have been some minor modifications on this since I got mine, so technically, yours is a better broom than mine is.” Ron didn’t comment, still gazing at the broom rapturously. Harry looked down the Gryffindor table, but to his surprise, no one seemed to have noticed the broom being delivered, or saw it now.

The others were all smiling as well, happy for Ron. Finally, Ron looked up from the broom and at Harry. “Harry, I... I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything, Ron. You know I wanted to do this, and your seventeenth birthday seemed like a good time. Just enjoy it.”

“Believe me, I will,” said Ron fervently. “Thank you.” Then, in a bit of humor Harry absolutely did not expect from him, Ron turned to Hermione and said, “Hermione, where can I go to give him a kiss?”

The other four howled with laughter. Finally, Hermione said, “Wow, you must be really happy, Ron, to even make a joke about something like that.”

Neville had noticed that they were now getting interested looks due to all the loud laughter. “I’m wondering, people are going to be asking who gave you that, Ron. Are you going to tell them?”

Hermione responded before Ron could. “Why wouldn’t he, Neville?”

Ron chuckled. “Wow, it’s pretty rare for me to catch the drift of a question that you didn’t, Hermione. He means that people are going to think it’s strange that Harry got me such an expensive gift. Frankly, Neville, I don’t care. People know we’re good friends. I don’t know if they know how much money he has, but it’s no skin off my back if they wonder.”

“I didn’t assume you would care, really, but I just wondered,” explained Neville.

“It’ll just add to Harry’s legend,” said Ron. ““And you know, he buys his friends extremely expensive presents!””

“Who buys his friends extremely expensive presents?” asked Professor McGonagall, who Harry assumed had seen the broom from a distance and come to investigate. “Is that another Firebolt?” she asked, obviously impressed.

“Yes, it is,” answered Hermione. “Today is Ron’s seventeenth birthday, and that’s his present from Harry.”

They all enjoyed her astonished expression; she looked as if she couldn’t think of anything to say. Finally, she raised an eyebrow at Harry and said, “And the gold that you spent on this, Harry, was it also tainted in some way?”

Everyone laughed at this rare joke from McGonagall, including Harry. “No, Professor. I’ve never done something like this before, and I may never again. But it’s not like I can’t afford it, and it just felt good to do it. So I did.”

She nodded in understanding. “It was very good of you, Ron, to allow him to do it.”

Ron raised his eyebrows, impressed at her grasp of what had happened. “He practically begged me to let him,” he said. “I think most people won’t believe that, but who cares?”

“A very good attitude,” she said approvingly. “I understand because I grew up in a family of limited means. I know that this is a substantial act of trust on your part. But I suspect it is not misplaced. A pity you are a Keeper, however, as it will not be useful for Quidditch.”

“Well, Professor, Ginny’s going to get my old broom, but I’ve just decided something. Before every game and practice, I’m going to switch brooms with her. I’ll use my old one, and she’ll use this. That way it can be put to good use.”

Ginny looked shocked. “No, Ron, you shouldn’t do that. It’s yours, you should use it.”

Ron shook his head. “Ginny, it’s completely wasted on me as a Keeper. I wouldn’t do it if you weren’t my sister, I’m not sure I’d trust anybody else with something like this. But it makes sense, and you know it.”

“Your brother is right, Miss Weasley,” said McGonagall. “It will still be his broom, you will just be borrowing it. I find myself rather looking forward to the match against Ravenclaw. Good day, everyone.” She walked back to her seat at the teachers’ table.

“Ron—“ started Ginny, but was interrupted by Harry.

“He’s right, Ginny. It’s good of him to do it, and he doesn’t have to, but it makes perfect sense. I didn’t get it for him for being a Keeper, I did it because it’s a great broom to have, especially if you’re a Quidditch fan and player. But he’ll still have it whenever he wants it, just for flying around.”

“Say, how about a fly later on?” Ron asked Harry. “After lunch?”

“Absolutely,” Harry agreed. “We can race.” Ron grinned.

Neville spoke up. “What did Professor McGonagall mean when she said that Ron accepting the broom was an act of trust? I didn’t get that.”

Ginny answered. “What she meant, Neville, is that that kind of gift can cause problems if things are handled badly. Sometimes, people buy other people expensive gifts but then make demands later, or imply that they’re indebted to the person who gave it to them. They can hurt them by making them feel bad about receiving something like that, or making unkind comments. Now, if Harry were to remind Ron about how he got the broom, or act like Ron owed him something—even as a well-intentioned joke—Ron would feel bad. Ron is trusting Harry that Harry won’t do that. Now, we all know Harry, and that’s the last thing he’d ever do. He’d feel terrible if he even accidentally said something that made Ron feel that way, that’s why McGonagall said his trust wasn’t misplaced. But that’s what she was talking about. If she came from a poor family, she would know about it firsthand. In a way, Ron really is doing Harry a favor.”

Neville seemed to understand. “You know, it’s funny,” said Harry, “I’d never even thought about what Ginny just said. I can see where it makes sense, but wouldn’t you have to be mean or stupid to do that? It just seems so obvious, not to act like that.”

“You’d be surprised, Harry,” replied Ginny. “A lot of people can be mean or stupid... not all the time, but especially at stressful times. People get mad, look for a nasty thing to say, and it comes out. Ron’ll probably have that broom for the rest of his life, so McGonagall’s right, it is an act of trust.”

“Thank you, Ron,” Harry said sincerely. “I really do appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome, Harry,” replied Ron, amused. “Now, let’s see what else I got. Just because it won’t cost a huge amount of money doesn’t mean it won’t be good.”

“Good attitude, Ron,” said Hermione, as Ron picked out a card. “Oh, this one’s from you,” he said to Hermione. She smiled and looked a little nervous.

Ron opened the card and read. Harry saw Ron's face change little by little as he read it, gradually softening. By the time he finished, Harry could tell he was touched. Ron looked at Hermione, saying nothing, but she could obviously tell from his expression how he felt, and her small smile got wider. "I'm not going to do that every year, Ron," she said. "I know it embarrasses you. But you're seventeen, and I just wanted to."

Now Ron smiled. "Usually it would, but for some reason, right now it doesn't," he said quietly. "Thank you, that's the nicest thing anybody's ever said to me." She leaned over and hugged him, whispering something into his ear. Harry saw Ron whisper back, but couldn't hear what it was. Harry exchanged a smile with Ginny; they both knew what they thought, and hoped, it was. Ron's come a long way this year, Harry thought.

After a hastily eaten lunch, Harry and Ron went out to the Quidditch pitch for a quick fly, as Ron had a one o'clock lesson. They flew for a half hour, taking great pleasure in executing pinpoint maneuvers accurately. As they walked back to the castle, Harry asked Ron if he could tell him what was in the card. Ron smiled in mild embarrassment and said, "Sorry, Harry, but I think it's one of those things that's supposed to stay between her and me. She said Neville doesn't even know what she wrote. Besides, you saw what happened, you could probably guess pretty well."

"I suppose I could," Harry agreed. "I hope I get one like that when I turn seventeen."

"I think you will, Harry. She knows you're not bothered about that kind of thing." Changing the subject, Ron enthused about his Firebolt. "This thing is amazing, isn't it? I mean, I've ridden on yours before, of course, but... somehow it's different when you know it's yours. It almost makes me want to be a Chaser."

"You could switch positions with Ginny," Harry joked.



Ron chuckled at the notion. “No, not with the championship match coming up. But we’re going to crush Ravenclaw now, I’m sure of it. This broom will leave their Chasers in the dust, and Ginny’s good, she’ll make good use of it.”

“Yeah, but you know what Hermione said... if I don’t get the Snitch—“

”You’ll get the Snitch, Harry. You always do,” said Ron.

“I wish I could be as sure of that as you are,” Harry replied. “But you saw what happened last time, Cho got the Snitch in twenty-eight seconds. Of course that’s not going to happen again, and I’m not going to get it in twelve. But it just makes the point that anything can happen. You said so yourself after the last match.”

Ron considered this, then, with the barest hint of a smile, said, “You’ll get the Snitch, Harry. You always do.”

Though he was a little annoyed, Harry couldn’t help but chuckle. “Good to see that you take my opinion so seriously.”

“No problem,” said Ron, sounding as if he took Harry’s sarcasm seriously. They entered the castle. “Oh, Harry, I’m almost late for History of Magic. Could you—“

”Put it in your trunk? Yeah, sure,” said Harry, accepting Ron’s Firebolt.

“Thanks, see you later,” said Ron, as he headed off for his class. Harry went back to Gryffindor Tower, put his and Ron’s brooms away, then headed back out to the staff room.

As usual, he was greeted in a friendly fashion by the other teachers as he entered. He sat down on a sofa next to Flitwick, who said, “Say, Harry, as long as you’re handing out Firebolts...”

Harry chuckled along with the others. “I guess I shouldn’t have expected Professor McGonagall to keep that to herself.”

“It certainly was not going to be a secret,” she pointed out. “It would have been noticed in practice, if nothing else. Besides, it is rather extraordinary.”

“I don’t see what’s so strange about it,” replied Harry. “I have more gold than I need or will ever use, he’s a very good friend, and I knew it would make him really happy.”

“Ah, Harry,” mused Sprout. “As brave as anyone I’ll ever meet, but in some ways, naive even for a sixteen-year-old.”

In response to Harry’s raised eyebrows, Flitwick explained, “It’s not the thoughtfulness of what you did, Harry, it’s the scale. People just don’t do things like that, even if they’re rich. The butterbeer for the first and second years, that was thoughtful. This is something else entirely. Even if you didn’t see it that way yourself, you have to understand that others will. Now, we know you, so we don’t think it’s strange, for you. You have a certain... innocence, I think is the best word, that is one of your better qualities. You do something because you think it’s the right thing to do, and you don’t think of reasons not to do it. You don’t let others’ cynicism or expectations sway you. It’s kind of nice, really. I hope you don’t grow out of it.”

“What would I do, except what I think is the right thing to do?”

Flitwick smiled sadly. “What a lot of people do, Harry. They do what people expect them to do, what they feel is appropriate, what is usual. Society tells us that we should do things a certain way, and we do. Most of us, anyway. Professor Dumbledore is a bit like you, in this way. He would wear unmatched socks, or eat highly unusual food, or make Hagrid a teacher. Don’t get me wrong,” he added as Harry reacted to what he said, “I like Hagrid, we all do.” Harry understood that even though Flitwick said ‘all,’ he was not including Snape, who was in the room, and not known to ‘like’ anything. “It’s just that a lot of eyebrows were raised when he was hired. He’s not what you’d call a conventional choice. But Professor Dumbledore does what he thinks is right, not what people would expect or be comfortable with. I just meant that you’re a bit like him in that way. Giving a friend a gift like that is something I could see him doing.” Harry saw the other teachers nodding in agreement.

Harry thought about this. “Well, it’s always a compliment to be compared to Professor Dumbledore. But then, I was a pretty unconventional choice for this job, too, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, exactly,” Flitwick agreed. “Even those of us who had taught you and liked you would have thought you were too young, or didn’t have enough experience. Those are the usual, traditional factors in thinking about a teacher. We would have said, give him five or ten years, he’ll make a good teacher. You probably would have thought that too. But Dumbledore somehow knew, and he didn’t let how it would look stop him. With Ron’s broom, I don’t think you even considered how it would look to anyone else. But there will come a time when you will, in such situations. I only hope that you’ll do the same things as you would have done before.”

“I have a feeling I will,” said Harry. “I can be pretty stubborn.”

Some of the teachers chuckled. “As Voldemort found out,” said Flitwick.

“Not to mention Dolores Umbridge,” agreed McGonagall. To Harry’s surprised look, she said to him, “I told them what you did, Harry. I did not assume it was a particular secret.”

Harry grunted. “I bet it’s still on my hand, if you look closely enough, so no, I suppose not.”

“We were all appalled, Harry,” said Sprout, kindly. “Not surprised, mind you, but appalled.”

“It’s ironic, though,” said Harry, “because she was right: I will not tell lies, even though she wanted me to.”

John nodded. “Yes, very Orwellian.” Answered by blank looks around the room, he sighed. “There really should be a class on the classics of Muggle literature. Nobody except Hermione would want to take it, of course, but still...” John spent the next few minutes explaining the plot and theme of 1984.

“Yes, John, I do see what you mean,” said McGonagall. “These themes often come up, both in art and real life. But I have read much of Shakespeare’s works, if that makes you feel any better.”

“A little bit,” said John. “But I’ll refrain from my usual diatribe.”

Harry hesitated, then said, “Excuse me, what’s a ‘diatribe?’”

A few teachers chuckled. Sprout said, “Don’t say that, Harry, you’re making his point for him.”

“A diatribe is a usually lengthy recitation or exposition of strongly held opinion,” explained McGonagall. “We would not characterize it as such, however, because the word has negative connotations. John is referring to the fact that he feels that Hogwarts focuses too strongly and exclusively on magic-related education, and not enough on subjects which are also taught at Muggle schools, subjects which cause people to be more well-rounded. For example, he feels that History of Magic should be a subset of a more general history course, and that there should be courses in literature, geography, and sociology. I do not disagree, in principle, but the fact is that most parents do not think that such subjects are necessary, and we must pay attention to what parents wish.”

“Parents shouldn’t be making that kind of decision for us,” said John.

Before McGonagall could respond, Harry spoke. “Excuse me, but I want to ask something... could everybody—except John, of course—raise their hand if they know what happened to Japanese-Americans in World War II?” McGonagall raised a hand, but she was the only one, out of seven teachers present. Of course, Harry realized, Snape wouldn’t raise his hand even if he knew.

Harry saw John wince. “Everybody should know that, no matter what country they’re from.” He gave a three-minute lecture to the other teachers on the subject, then asked Harry, “How did you know about that? From when you went to Muggle schools?”

“No, I heard about it at the Weasleys’,” he replied. He went on to relate the main points of the conversation.

“I’ve never met Arthur Weasley, but he sounds like someone I’d like to get to know,” said John. “He’s right, of course. Granted, there are such parallels in wizarding history as well, and one could argue that understanding wizarding history is enough from which to draw lessons. I would disagree, of course.”

“Speaking of which, Harry,” said Sprout, “I don’t know if you’ve heard this already, but I have a few friends high up in the Ministry, and they say that your name’s been coming up in their talks recently. Apparently you’ve become popular enough in wizarding society that some are thinking of trying to use your popularity for their own ends. They’ve been debating some anti-Voldemort measures, and they might want your public support for them.”

Flitwick shook his head. “Talk about a babe in the woods...” Sprout nodded.

“Why wouldn’t I support anti-Voldemort measures?” asked Harry.

“Because, Harry,” said John, “the rounding up of Japanese-Americans was considered a ‘security measure.’ The phrase overlooked the human cost of what was done, and caused very few to question it. The phrase ‘anti-Voldemort measure’ sounds suspiciously similar. If you’re a politician, you can wrap up questionable actions in a nice-sounding phrase, and attack people who disagree with you. I strongly suspect that whatever these measures might be, they won’t only affect Voldemort. If the Ministry talks to you and asks for your support, you have to be very careful, or they could end up saying you support something you really don’t.”

“Given the events of last year, I think Harry has more than sufficient reason to be suspicious of the Ministry’s motives. I do not think he is quite so ‘innocent’ as to overlook that,” said McGonagall. “As to the rest, I’m sure Professor Dumbledore will give him such guidance as he requires.”

“He always does,” agreed Harry. “But I have to say, I’m not thrilled about the Ministry asking me to do anything. Why do they need me? Can’t they do what they want to do?”

“They can’t do what they want without certain levels of public support,” explained John, “and they may think you supporting them publicly can help them

get that. Despite your age, what you did in September and the fact that you survive all these attempts on your life gives you a kind of moral authority, which is something Fudge lacks. They'll want you to lend them your moral authority. But the problem is, and this is what they won't tell you, that the more you speak publicly, the less people will listen. If you started being a Ministry spokesperson, soon nobody would listen to you, no matter what you've accomplished. If you publicly support the Ministry in anything, it had better be something you want badly, not just something they want badly."

Harry shook his head, lost in thought. Finally he said, "One thing I know for sure, I never want to work at the Ministry."

Sprout looked at him kindly. "Believe me when I say, Harry, that I mean this as a high compliment... you would make a very poor politician."

Harry chuckled along with the rest. "I'm beginning to get that feeling," he agreed. "But can I really say 'no' to the Ministry if they ask me for something? Won't it seem like I don't want to help, or don't care?"

"There are many people," said McGonagall, "who will take their cue from you rather than from the Ministry. If this were not the case, the Ministry would not bother to court your support. If you do not cooperate with the Ministry, those who admire you will assume that what the Ministry asked was not worthy of your support."

Harry found that hard to believe. "But I'm only sixteen! I hardly know anything about politics, or this kind of thing. Why should anybody listen to what I say, or think? I barely know what I think!"

Flitwick regarded Harry compassionately. "I'm afraid that this is an example of the maxim 'no good deed goes unpunished.' With your incredible courage, you've inspired people to act in ways that make our society stronger. But the price that you pay for that is that you get dragged into politics. There's really no avoiding it. I mean, you could always ignore the Ministry, but it doesn't help your cause to do so. But to answer your question, people will listen to you, not because of your

expertise on the issues, but because they trust the instincts of someone who's been willing to face Voldemort and put his life on the line like you have. And frankly, Harry, I can think of worse reasons. I mean, I used to say You-Know-Who, and I can't say that I wouldn't still be if it weren't for you." Harry saw other teachers nod in agreement. "Now, I'm not saying that people don't have their own opinion, or will mindlessly support anything you say. But because of what you've done, many people will know that if you feel strongly about something, it's not for self-serving reasons. They give it weight, whereas if Fudge supports something, many people will assume his motives involve his personal political interests."

"Now, why would they think that," muttered McGonagall.

Harry didn't say anything for a moment; he felt overwhelmed by what he could be facing. "I'm just not sure I'm ready to deal with this."

To his surprise, Snape finally spoke. "You had better get ready to deal with it, Professor. You cannot waste the status you have while you wallow in indecision, feeling put upon. Those who would undermine your efforts will not be idle."

Harry looked at Snape in annoyance. He wanted to say, I'm sixteen, for crying out loud, haven't I done enough? But a part of him knew that Snape was right, cold and clinical though he was. Still, Harry was annoyed enough that he couldn't stop himself from annoying Snape right back. He looked up and said, "You're just saying that to make me feel better."

A few teachers snorted in efforts to keep from laughing, and some let out a chuckle. Flitwick muttered, "Wow, you really are brave."

Snape looked at Harry very coldly and said, "You appear, Professor, to already have plenty of people ready to do that for you." Harry wondered if that was a swipe at the other teachers for laughing at his comment.

He sighed. "You're right, of course, Professor Snape. I know I have to deal with it, ready or not. Professor Dumbledore would excuse my acting like this, he'd say I was still too young. Maybe I am, but I guess that's just too bad. I'd better get some opinions, and be really careful if I have to deal with the Ministry. And have a

talk with Professor Dumbledore, which you can never go wrong doing. I wish Fawkes were here.” Just as Harry finished saying the word ‘here,’ Fawkes materialized and perched on his shoulder. Harry chuckled and reached up to pet him. “Thank you, Fawkes. I guess I tend to forget that I can ask you to come, and you actually will.”

“Perhaps Hagrid will remind you,” said McGonagall. “You are doing phoenixes today, are you not?”

“Yes, he mentioned that last time,” said Harry. “Maybe I’ll learn something I didn’t know.”

“Perhaps, but he will probably ask you a few questions about Fawkes as well,” she replied. “He has never had a phoenix companion as a student in such a class before. He will want to use you as a resource.”

“I won’t do that for the Ministry, but I will for Hagrid.” He left and headed out toward Hagrid’s hut, even though the class would not start for another half hour.

As McGonagall had predicted, Hagrid asked Harry several questions about Fawkes’s behavior. Hagrid spent some time talking about the transition period between the older and younger companion, since that was what was occurring with Fawkes. Fawkes spent the entire lesson on Harry’s shoulder, despite Hagrid’s requests to Fawkes that he move. “Sorry, Hagrid, but I was feeling kind of down earlier, and I think he knows I need him around right now,” Harry had said. Hagrid had then talked about the phoenix’s effect on its companion’s mood.

After the class, still with Fawkes on his shoulder, Harry and his friends headed off to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom to meet Pansy. Sometimes Harry still met with her privately, but now that she was on friendly terms with all of them, sometimes one or two would join Harry and Pansy in the office while the others stood watch in the classroom. Today Ron joined Harry in the office, while Neville and Hermione sat in the classroom.



“Good to see you, Harry, Ron,” said Pansy as they all sat down. “And happy birthday, Ron.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I assume you heard about my big present by now.”

“Hermione’s card? Yes, I did,” she replied with a straight face.

Harry and Ron looked at each other, startled. “She told you what was in it?” asked Harry. “He won’t tell me.”

“She didn’t say exactly what was in it, she just gave me a sense of it. Please don’t look so put off, Ron. She tells me about what’s happening in her life, and this card was important to her. I just wished I could have been there when you opened it.”

“It was very... heartwarming, you could say,” said Harry, to Ron’s further embarrassment. “It had the effect that Hermione intended.”

Pansy smiled. “I’m so glad, she was really nervous. She was afraid you might not take it seriously, or be too embarrassed. Ron, are you still upset that she told me about it?”

Ron squirmed. “Well, not really, it’s just that—“

Ron was interrupted by Hermione, who had just walked into the office, obviously having overheard the conversation. “Ron, come on,” she said impatiently. “This isn’t gossip. You know how isolated Pansy is, she needs to hear about stuff like this. Do you think she wants me to bore her with stories about goblin rebellions all night? You take it for granted that you can talk to anyone you like, anytime, but for her—“

”All right, all right!” Ron almost shouted. Confident that her point had been made, Hermione walked back to the classroom without another word. Ron looked at Pansy guiltily. “I hate it when she’s right,” he whispered. Pansy giggled. In a normal voice, he said, “I’m sorry, Pansy. I do forget that, and I shouldn’t. I was just... anyway, it was a great card, and it made me really happy.” Harry was impressed; now Ron seemed to be trying to be more open to make up for his earlier reaction. “Unlike his lousy gift,” Ron added, smiling at Harry.

Pansy smiled too. “Yes, I knew about that, too. I also heard that Harry was nervous about it. People seem to be nervous about giving you nice presents, Ron.”

Ron looked annoyed. “Well, they shouldn’t be,” he said defensively. “I didn’t have a fit or anything after either one, did I?”

“Well, I was nervous about giving you mine, but since you say you won’t have a fit, then I won’t be nervous. Happy birthday, Ron.” She got up, leaned over, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He smiled. “Thank you, Pansy,” he said. She happily sat back down. Harry wondered if Ron was more accepting of the gesture than normal because of Hermione’s reminder of Pansy’s situation, but he hoped not.

“So, yes, of course the broom is fantastic,” Ron allowed. “Had a fly on it earlier, it responds so quickly, it almost seems to know what you’re thinking. And the acceleration... well, I shouldn’t ramble, I know you’re not that interested in brooms.”

“That’s all right, Ron,” she said. “You should talk about the things you’re excited about. I’m glad you liked Harry’s gift so much.”

Ron chuckled. “It would be hard not to, considering what it was. I bet Malfoy had a few choice comments about it when he heard.”

Pansy’s expression didn’t change, but Harry winced just a little. He said to Ron, “Ron, we don’t talk about that here.”

Ron looked confused. “Why not?”

“Let’s put it this way,” said Harry. “If your job was cleaning up vomit all day long, would you want to talk about vomit when you got home?”

Pansy giggled, but Ron looked thoughtful. “I hadn’t thought of it that way,” he admitted. “Sorry, Pansy.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “I really like Harry’s analogy. Right now, I feel like spending a day cleaning up vomit would be a nice change of pace. Too bad I can’t share that with Malfoy. Anyway, yes, he found out in mid-morning, and he’s been going on about it ever since. He really couldn’t believe it, he thought he must have

heard it wrong. He can't imagine why Harry would do such a thing. He's been thinking maybe it's to make sure Gryffindor wins at Quidditch, or for Harry to show off how much money he has—which is funny, because Malfoy's always done that, just not by being generous—or just because Harry's addled, he's always liked that one. Later on, he started making insinuations about the two of you.”

Harry laughed as Ron rolled his eyes. “Ron, next time we see Malfoy, let's have a big hug, how about it?” Ron gave Harry a ‘very funny’ look as Pansy now laughed.

“Yes, that's the sort of thing we need to encourage,” said Ron dryly.

“I'd almost do it, just to see the look on his face,” chuckled Harry. “Funny, if I'd given this to Ginny instead of you...”

Pansy nodded. “The whole school would assume she was your girlfriend. They wouldn't even ask, they'd just assume, and if you denied it, they wouldn't believe you. I've heard people talking, and even people who like you don't know quite what to make of it. It is pretty unusual.”

“Yes, the teachers were telling me that earlier,” said Harry. He related the conversation about the broom.

“Yes, I think ‘innocence’ is a good word,” she agreed. “And the parts about you doing what you think is right, and not caring what people think, that's absolutely true. I like that about you as well.”

Harry smiled wryly. “Remember, I'm Harry Potter. If I'd spent my life worrying about what people thought of me, I'd be insane by now. I think I learned to ignore it just as a kind of self-defense.”

“Oh, I have to tell you what happened in our Care of Magical Creatures class,” she said. “It was phoenixes, of course, same as yours, and he had Fawkes there. He read—did he do the same thing in your class?—this quote from a book—“

Harry and Ron nodded. “Yes, the same one, I'm sure,” said Ron. In the class, when discussing how phoenixes chose their companions, Hagrid had read a quote from the author of the definitive text on phoenixes: “Many phoenixes do not

choose to companion humans, of course, and those that do are highly selective about those they choose. Invariably, the person the phoenix chooses will be a person of great stature, one who is respected and admired by his peers and has leadership qualities. The person will also be highly compassionate, possessing great courage, modesty, and strength of character. But the phoenix is most attracted of all to one with a kind and loving nature.”

“Oh, you should have seen the look on his face,” chuckled Pansy. “He was acting like the author didn’t know what he was talking about, of course. He asked Hagrid if the author had a phoenix, and Hagrid said no, he didn’t. Then he said there must be something wrong with Fawkes, and the Ravenclaws started in on him. Padma said, ‘I don’t see you getting any scrolls, Malfoy,’ and then Anthony asked Hagrid if there was anything about them liking people who cheated at Quidditch.” Both Harry and Ron were laughing heartily now, and Harry could hear Hermione and Neville also laughing in the classroom. “Most people had heard about your giving Ron the Firebolt by then—it was just before lunch—and Mandy asked whether ‘generous’ was in the list of qualities. Hagrid said it wasn’t mentioned specifically, but that the idea fell under the heading of a kind and loving nature. Terry mentioned the butterbeer, and soon there was a five-minute discussion of your good qualities and which ones in particular caused Fawkes to choose you. It was so hard not to laugh at Malfoy, having to listen to all that.”

Ron was still laughing. “I just would’ve loved to see Harry have to listen to that, although we teased him fairly good ourselves. But what they did was better, because Harry wasn’t there, so they were serious.” He chuckled more, as did Pansy, at Harry’s discomfort. “Poor Harry, subjected to so much praise.”

“Even in our class, when Hagrid read the quote, I wanted to crawl into the ground,” said Harry. “Well, as long as I can be a source of entertainment for my friends, then it’s all worth it. Did he say the thing about why he read the quote?”

Pansy nodded. “He said because he was personal friends with two phoenix companions, he wanted to read us something from a book so he couldn’t be accused of bias. It got a bit of a laugh.”

“It got a bigger laugh for us, probably because Harry was there, being all embarrassed,” said Ron. “Parvati said, ‘At least the part about modesty seems to be accurate.’ I almost felt sorry for Harry.”

“Not sorry enough not to make a few comments yourself,” Harry pointed out.

“I did say ‘almost,’ didn’t I?” Ron replied. “Besides, you have plenty of laughs at my expense.”

“I can’t deny that,” Harry agreed.

“Oh, I don’t want to forget to mention,” put in Pansy, “after that class, all through lunchtime, Malfoy was on a real tear about you, Harry. Not that that’s important, but a few things he said were new to me. I got the feeling he wouldn’t have said them if he hadn’t been so angry at you. He made reference to ‘the stuff that disappeared,’ and suggested that you wouldn’t be here right now if it hadn’t. When I looked at him like I was surprised, he just waved his hand and acted like it was nothing. The next thing he talked about was overly casual, as if he were making too big an effort to change the subject. One thing that’s always true about Malfoy, he’s never very subtle. I didn’t push it, of course. But the obvious conclusion was that he did smuggle some Dark Arts items in here after Christmas, and that they were found and taken. And that surprised me, because I was sure from what Dumbledore said that he wouldn’t do that. What do you think?”

“Snape,” Harry said simply. “Has to be.”

Pansy nodded. “That was what I thought, too.”

“Couldn’t Dumbledore just have changed his mind, considering the danger Harry was in?” asked Ron.

Harry and Pansy shook their heads together. “We heard him talk about that,” Pansy said. “He was serious. He’s willing to risk Harry’s life for the principles of treating students properly. He wasn’t going to change his mind.”

“But it’s just exactly what Snape would do,” said Harry. “Snape is the realist, the hardheaded one. After the Goyle thing, the next time all the students were out of their dormitories, he must’ve gone into the Slytherin sixth years boys’ dormitory and searched it, found some stuff, and taken it, without telling Dumbledore. The only thing I find hard to believe is that he would betray Dumbledore’s trust like that.”

“He probably figured he was doing Dumbledore a favor, saving your life,” suggested Ron. “He doesn’t care about Dumbledore’s principles.”

“But he cares about Dumbledore, I know that,” said Harry. “He couldn’t tell Dumbledore what he did, because it violated his trust. But he knew he was accomplishing the result that Dumbledore would want, even if he was doing it in a way Dumbledore wouldn’t want. For Snape, the result is the important thing.”

“So, do we go to Dumbledore and tell him this?” asked Ron. “I’d say no, you shouldn’t. Let Snape keep doing it, it’ll help keep you alive.”

“I absolutely agree,” said Pansy. “I respect Dumbledore’s principles, but I’m not ready to put them above your life, Harry.”

Harry stared straight ahead and said nothing as Hermione entered the office. She looked at him, and he saw a look of resignation on her face; she was obviously thinking the same thing he was. To Ron and Pansy, she said, “I agree with you both, but Harry’s going to tell him. I’m not happy about it, but I understand his reasons.”

Pansy looked shocked; Ron was looking at him as if he were crazy. “I can’t lie to him,” Harry said simply.

“So, you don’t have to,” said Ron, as if surprised that Harry could have overlooked something so obvious. “Just don’t say anything about it.”

“That’s what’s called a lie of omission, Ron,” said Hermione quietly. “Harry knows that Dumbledore would want to know. It’s really the same thing.”

Ron was still bewildered, and getting angry. “So what? Since when did not lying become something that you’re willing to risk your life for? Or is it because you think he’s going to find out, that he’ll be able to tell?”

Harry shook his head. “It wouldn’t matter if he were a Legilimens or not, and I don’t know if it would let him recognize a lie of omission. But his trust means a lot to me... I just feel like I have this relationship with him... I just couldn’t get myself to do it. I don’t even know if I can explain it, I just can’t do it.”

Ron was obviously not persuaded. With more emotion than Harry had ever seen from him, Ron looked at Harry and said, “You have to let Snape continue searching. This could get you killed.” He paused for a moment, then added, “It could get us killed, too.”

Harry was looking at Ron’s face, but no longer seeing him; he was seeing the room in the Auror offices after the department store attack, remembering how he’d felt, how desperate he’d been for no harm to come to them. The thought that harm could come to them by his being honest with Dumbledore was very painful, mainly because he knew it could happen. At the same time, he knew he couldn’t not tell Dumbledore this. He took off his glasses and put his hands over his eyes, trying to hold back the tears he felt coming.

“I can’t believe you said that, Ron!” said Hermione angrily, trying not to shout. “We all know that it’s him you’re worried about, not yourself, you’re just using that argument because you know it’ll affect him. Do you think he’s forgotten about how he felt after the department store? You think he forgot about Pansy’s body flying out of that chest? That’s his worst fear! So, naturally, you wheel it out when you want him to change his mind about something?” She paused to rein in her emotions. “I can’t believe you said that,” she repeated, glaring at him.

Harry moved his hands aside and glanced at Ron; even without his glasses, he could see that Ron was both still angry at what Harry was going to do and

chastened by what Hermione had said. Harry took a deep breath, and saw Ron do the same thing at the same time. Harry put his glasses back on, and looked up at Hermione. “Unfortunately, he’s right, it is something I should think about. It’s my responsibility, and—“

”No, it’s not!” said Hermione urgently, again seeming to shout without raising her voice. “You’re responsible for you, not us! He even said that to you that day! He seems to have forgotten it now,” she continued, turning to glare at Ron again for a moment before turning back to Harry, “but what he said was true then, and it is now. You have to do what you think is right, and that’s all. After that, we’re responsible for what we do.”

Nobody spoke for a minute, as all three seemed to need time to calm down. Finally Ron spoke, his expression contrite. “Harry, I’m—“

”It’s all right, Ron, you don’t—“

”No, it’s not all right, I want to say this,” said Ron determinedly. “Hermione’s right... yes, it’s such a shock, that never happens... anyway, I’m sorry, I really am. It’s just that... maybe I shouldn’t say this, either, but...” He took another deep breath, then continued, looking Harry in the eyes. “If I’d been the one opening that chest, it might very well have been your body flying out of there. And I don’t think I’m the only one,” he added, glancing at Hermione and Pansy, who both looked down. “That doesn’t excuse what I said; I should never have said it, I wish I hadn’t. I guess I just want you to understand why I’d do that. I really wasn’t thinking... I just really wanted you to change your mind.”

Harry fought back tears again, this time for a different reason. He knew how hard it must have been for Ron to say that, and it was a strong indication of both how sorry Ron was and the extent to which he feared for Harry’s life. “I understand, and I’m sorry too. It’s like what you said to me after the boggart,” he said, looking at Pansy, “that you didn’t realize it was like that for me. I guess I’m so busy worrying about all of you and feeling put upon because of the risks you take



because of me that I don't think about what it's like for you, I don't think about you worrying about me... but I suppose you do, don't you, all of you..."

"Of course," said Pansy softly.

"I try not to talk about it to you," admitted Hermione. "It's not like you don't have enough to worry about. But yes, sure I do."

They heard Neville's voice from the classroom, saying, "Me, too," just loud enough for them to hear. They all chuckled, breaking the tension for the moment.

"Thank you, Neville, I appreciate that," replied Harry, raising his voice enough that Neville could hear.

"Any time," they heard Neville respond. Harry smiled, but turned serious again as his mind came back to the main topic. He looked at Ron. "I'm sorry, Ron, I know you worry, and you know how I feel about you guys being at risk... but even with all that, I still can't do it. I'm not even sure I could say why, it's just there. I mean, I'll plead with him to allow the searches, but—"

Ron shook his head. "You don't have to do that, Harry, and you don't have to apologize. I can tell how much it means to you, and that's all I really need to know." He paused, then continued. "It's funny... we were making fun of you just a while ago, talking about the qualities that got you chosen by Fawkes, but it actually just occurred to me that this might be one of them, that this is how strongly you feel about Dumbledore, how you don't want to let him down, that lying to him is just inconceivable. It's very noble, even if it's frustrating."

Hermione nodded and looked at Harry sympathetically. "I had that thought too... not that it does Harry much good."

There was another silence, then Hermione said, "Well, you might as well go to his office now, get it over with so we don't have to keep thinking about it. I guess Pansy should go too, since she's the one who heard Malfoy say it."

"I'm going too," said Ron. "I want to be there, maybe say something."

Harry raised his eyebrows a bit, but had no objection. Neville walked into the office, holding Hermione's map. "There's a clear path to Dumbledore's office, so you won't be seen, but Snape's in there with him," said Neville.

"Good," said Ron. "Maybe he can persuade Dumbledore to allow the searches."

Pansy and Hermione shook their heads. "It's not going to happen, Ron," said Pansy sadly. "I've heard him talk about this, he's really serious about it."

"We can always hope," said Harry. "Let's go."

He and Ron walked up to the gargoyles, gave the password, and approached the office. Outside, they waited for Pansy to catch up, then Harry knocked and the door opened. Snape raised his eyebrows; Dumbledore appeared surprised, but was his usual gracious self. "Harry, Ron, Pansy, what can I do for you?"

"There's something I need to tell you, sir," said Harry. "I got some new information from Pansy today. We don't know for certain that it's true, but we strongly suspect it, and I know you would want to know. Pansy, would you tell him what Malfoy said?" Pansy told him, after which Harry continued, "Even if what we suspect is not true, I know you would still want to know it, so that's why we're here."

"And what is it you suspect, exactly, Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

"As I'm sure you know, sir, to us the obvious conclusion is that some time soon after the attack by Goyle, Professor Snape searched the Slytherin sixth year boys' dormitory and removed whatever Dark Arts items Malfoy had hidden there."

Dumbledore was silent for a few seconds. Then he looked at Snape. "Is what they suspect true, Severus?"

Snape looked levelly at Dumbledore. "Yes, Headmaster."

Harry was sure he saw a flicker of pain cross Dumbledore's face, but it was gone very quickly, and Dumbledore appeared to be his usual serene self. He thought for another minute, then said, "Harry, I sense that you tell me this only with the deepest reluctance. May I ask why?"

“I’m sorry, sir... do you mean why I told you, or why I’m reluctant?”

“Both, if you would.”

Harry nodded. “The reason I’m reluctant, and I’m reluctant to say this as well, is that I approve—“

”We,” interjected Ron.

“We approve of what Professor Snape did. We agree that the principle is important, and for myself I would take the risk, but right now, any risk to me is a risk to them. Maybe this means I don’t have the right strength of character to be a leader, but I can’t bring myself to put the principle above their safety.

“As for why I told you anyway... I just couldn’t bear to lie to you. I couldn’t live with it.”

Dumbledore nodded, and thought some more. “Ron, I see that you feel strongly about this. Is that why you accompanied them here?”

“Yes, sir. I wanted to tell you that I tried hard—too hard—to persuade Harry not to tell you this. I reminded him of the danger to the rest of us, hoping it would change his mind. I shouldn’t have done that. I just...” Ron trailed off; Harry didn’t know whether he couldn’t think of what to say next, or was just reluctant.

Dumbledore finished it for him.

“You reacted emotionally; you were desperate to keep him from being exposed to any risk not absolutely necessary. I understand, Ron,” said Dumbledore gently. “I have been through this sort of thing before, and I know how you feel. As I have said before, it is only with the greatest reluctance that I put Harry at risk for the sake of principles. I fully understand why you cannot bear to subject Harry to this sort of risk for the reasons I have.”

He was silent again for a few moments. “Severus... had you not conducted your search, what are the chances that Harry would still be alive?”

“Zero, Headmaster,” said Snape simply.

Harry could easily believe that. Dumbledore considered further. Finally he said gravely, “Severus, after Easter vacation, you have my permission to conduct such searches as you consider necessary.”

Harry and his friends gaped at each other; this was the last thing Harry had expected. Snape raised an eyebrow. “Very well, Headmaster,” he replied.

Dumbledore regarded Harry, Ron, and Pansy. “You wish to ask me why I did that,” he observed. They nodded. “I am a leader, but not a dictator,” he explained. “I cannot lead where others are not willing, or able, to follow. I do not need to ask Professor Snape to know that he was extremely reluctant to violate my trust, and did it out of what he felt was the most dire necessity. You three badly wish to be able to agree with me in this matter, but you cannot. I must recognize that there is nothing more you can do. I should have recognized that you would feel as strongly as you do, and not asked of you what I have.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” said Harry sadly. “We should be stronger—“

He stopped as Dumbledore shook his head. “I am not infallible, Harry, as you have already seen. This issue is most definitely not a black and white one; it would be foolish to say that setting aside principles for reasons of necessity is never justified. It is a matter of judgment, and people of good conscience can differ. I feel so strongly about it because it is my judgment that the first step down the slippery slope is the easiest, the most defensible... and the most dangerous. But I can respect other opinions.”

“I don’t think it’s so much a matter of opinion, sir,” said Pansy. “In principle, I agree with your opinion. I hate to take that first step, I really do. I know the possible consequences. Maybe I’m just falling into the same trap that so many people have, and it’ll just be one more chapter of folly in a history book. I know the right thing to do, I just couldn’t do it.”

Dumbledore shook his head again. “It is not that simple, Pansy. You have heard about instances in history where the thin end of the wedge widened quickly and disastrously, but you do not usually hear about instances where the wedge did

not widen and did no further damage. Nobody remarks on the dog that did not bark, as it were. It is not totally clear-cut.”

“You must have thought it was, sir, to put Harry at risk when it was the last thing you wanted to do,” Pansy said.

“That does not mean I am not making an error in judgment. All it means is that I feel very strongly. But Professor Snape has said that Harry would be dead now if not for what he did, and I know we all believe that is true. I cannot be unaffected by that. There is no right and wrong to this, and all your actions indicate to me that I have gone too far in one direction. While a leader cannot follow those he leads, he must also take note of their feelings and incorporate them into his judgment. For example, you may think I will be angry at, or disappointed in, Professor Snape for violating my trust. In fact, I feel remorse that I put him in a position in which he felt he had little choice but to do so. If you ask someone to do something, you must know what you are asking of them. I have made a misjudgment, and I am simply recognizing that.

“There is another aspect to this, as well,” added Dumbledore, after another moment’s thought. “Harry, you were willing to risk your own safety, though not that of your friends, for the sake of principle. But you were willing to risk both for the sake of not lying to me. I am deeply touched by this, by the trust you place in me even though you do not agree with my judgment. To be worthy of that trust, I must give you reason to know that your trust will not be misplaced. I do so by giving your feelings and opinions their due consideration.”

Harry didn’t know what to say. “Thank you, sir.” He again hoped that he might someday become the sort of person Dumbledore was.

“You are welcome, Harry. Is there anything else I can do for you?” Harry and the others shook their heads and prepared to leave, but they stopped when Snape spoke.

“Professor Potter, Miss Parkinson... and you, Mr. Weasley, and your friends... Mr. Malfoy’s items were found easily, because he did not expect his belongings to be

searched. After Easter, he will expect it, and take measures. There are magical ways to secrete items in such a way as to make them unfindable even by one who knows what he is looking for. You must all be on a high state of alert at that time. He can be expected to act shortly after vacation, for he will fear that his items may be found no matter how well he hides them.”

“Believe me, sir, we’ll be as ready as we can be,” said Pansy fervently, as Harry and Ron nodded. They turned to leave, Ron and Pansy adding their thanks to Dumbledore.

Harry and Ron had another fly just before dinner. They couldn’t fly over the pitch because Ravenclaw was having a practice, but they came near a few times as they raced. A few Ravenclaws interrupted their practice to wave them over for a chat, and to check out Ron’s Firebolt.

“Really nice,” said Terry Boot, examining what he could as Ron was sitting on it, hovering. “But what are you going to do with it as a Keeper?”

Ron shrugged. “I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but for Quidditch I’m going to let Ginny use it, for practice and games.”

A few Ravenclaws shook their heads in annoyance, as Cho came over and joined them. “What, Harry having a Firebolt against Cho’s Shooting Star wasn’t good enough for you?” complained Michael Corner.

“I didn’t get it for him so we could win at Quidditch,” protested Harry. “I would have done it even if we couldn’t use it for Quidditch.”

Boot nodded. “You can’t question his word, Michael. He’s a phoenix companion, after all.”

Harry and Ron chuckled, as did all the Ravenclaws except Corner. “Thanks, Terry. Oh, and thanks to all you Ravenclaws for sticking up for me in class earlier. I appreciate it.”

Boot shook his head. “I just wish Malfoy would leave, he’s such a creep.”

“I’m afraid he’s not going anywhere until he’s got a knife in Harry’s back, or has done his best to do that,” said Ron unhappily.

“If we’re anywhere around, he’ll have to get through us to do it,” said Cho fiercely. “I know the Diffusion Shield too, you know.”

Harry felt a wave of emotion at this show of support. “Thanks, Cho... I really appreciate that.” Ron nodded his agreement.

“Well, you’d better let us get on with our practice,” said Boot. “Clearly, we’re going to need as much as we can get.”

Harry felt a bit guilty. “Okay, see you later,” he said, and he and Ron flew off. As they flew out of the Ravenclaws’ hearing range, Ron said, “You don’t feel guilty about having better equipment, do you? I mean, we’ve beaten the Slytherins every time despite their brooms. You have to have good people on the brooms, Harry. You’re good, and so is Ginny. If we win, it’ll be because we deserve it.”

Harry nodded, not wanting to argue with Ron, but he knew the brooms could make the difference in a close match. He reflected that often life was not fair; it just happened to be unfair in their favor this time.

After dinner, Harry and the others went back to Gryffindor Tower. He practiced dueling with Neville for an hour, then they turned their attention to teaching the others. Ron and Hermione were getting better at real dueling, as was Ginny, though she was behind the others, not having had Dumbledore’s lessons on dueling. After explaining one of the ideas he and Neville learned from the Aurors, Harry heard a voice behind him saying, “I see that teaching four hours a day is not enough for you, Professor.” He turned to see McGonagall regarding him with amusement.

“Professor!” Harry said, surprised. McGonagall’s appearances in the Gryffindor common room were rare. “Did you want to talk to me?”

Her manner was that of one delivering bad news. “You have visitors, Professor. Two people from the Ministry of Magic, including Minister Fudge, wish to speak to you.”

Harry shook his head and swore mildly. “I do hope that you will be more diplomatic than that,” she said, almost smiling.

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” said Harry. “You know this isn’t exactly my strong suit.”

She nodded sympathetically. “I’m afraid that this is the time to take Professor Snape’s advice.”

He reluctantly agreed. “Neville, could you finish this up?” Neville nodded.

Hermione stepped up. “Remember Harry, don’t agree to anything until you’ve had some time to think about it, and be careful what you say that they could misrepresent later. Also, be sure you don’t—“

”Would you like to come, Miss Granger?” interrupted McGonagall. “You could wear his Invisibility Cloak, sit next to him, and whisper.”

Harry laughed, and Hermione smiled. “I really would, Professor. Okay, Harry, go on.”

“It should make you feel better to know that Professor Dumbledore will be there with him,” said McGonagall to Hermione.

“It makes me feel better, that’s for sure,” said Harry. “All right, I’m ready.”

They left Gryffindor Tower and headed for Dumbledore’s office, which Harry was glad to know would be the setting; he tended to feel comfortable there. They went past the gargoyles and knocked on the door, which opened. “Ah, thank you, Minerva. Harry, please come in. You know Minister Fudge, of course.” Harry politely shook hands with Fudge, who seemed to be putting on his friendly-uncle manner. Harry had seen this before and believed that to be what Fudge was like, but here, he knew it was nothing more than a mask. The real Fudge, he felt, was the one he had seen trying to railroad him at the disciplinary hearing a year and a half ago.



“And this gentleman,” continued Dumbledore, gesturing to the man Harry had never met, “is Archibald Dentus, a former high-level Ministry official.”

Dentus extended his hand. He was older, Harry guessed he was in his sixties, with short gray hair and a trimmed beard. He smiled as he shook Harry’s hand. “It’s good to meet you, Professor,” he said. “Professor Dumbledore has told me about you.”

Harry looked at Dumbledore in mild surprise. “Archibald is an old friend, Harry,” he said. “He and I have been known to differ, but I have always respected him and his views.”

Dentus grinned. “Well, I suppose that amounts to an endorsement, under the circumstances.” They sat down, and Fudge spoke.

“Firstly, Harry, I, and the Ministry, would like to express our regret for what happened last year...” He was going to continue, but Harry didn’t feel Fudge was sincere, so he decided to be aggressive, even if it was the wrong thing to do.

“I’m sorry, Minister, but do you mean for not believing that Voldemort was back, or for the abuse I took in the Prophet?”

Small grins crossed the faces of Dentus and Dumbledore; Fudge looked flustered. “Well, there was some unpleasantness, that’s true, but I am hoping we can—“

”Unpleasantness’, Minister?” Harry asked, trying to keep his emotions out of his voice, and not doing very well. “I don’t think you would just call it ‘unpleasant’ if you knew, like I did, that Voldemort was back and that nothing was being done about it, that in fact there were many people trying to make sure nothing was done about it. He’s had a whole extra year to prepare. Maybe if that hadn’t happened, he wouldn’t have so much spare time to try to kill me.”

Fudge looked like he was simultaneously abashed and trying not to be angry. “Harry, we had to have proof of his return. With no impetus from us, the Prophet had already printed articles that suggested that you were... not quite right. I realize now that they were incorrect, of course, but you must understand, nobody would

have believed you, and there could have been a panic. The rational thing to do was to try to keep emotions down. As I was starting to say earlier, I regret what was done. I wish that we had acted differently.”

Harry still didn’t believe it, but at least it sounded more genuine, and he decided to accept it for now. “I understand, Minister. But please don’t use words like ‘unpleasantness.’ I’d really rather you called it what it was.”

Dumbledore put in, “You must understand, Cornelius, that Harry is sixteen years old and not well versed in political nuance. Words such as ‘unpleasantness’ or ‘regret’ will be interpreted correctly by those versed in politics, but to Harry, it sounds as though you are trivializing what he has been through, which I assure you is a great deal. If you can discard the political language and speak more directly and plainly, I think Harry will be more receptive to what you have to say.”

Fudge nodded, trying to keep his impatience down. “I’ll try, Dumbledore. Harry, what happened last year was unfair and wrong, and I’m sorry about it.”

Harry almost smiled, and nodded. “That, I can understand. Thank you. I want you to know, Minister, that I don’t hold a grudge against the Ministry. I know the Ministry represents the people, and I want to do what I can to help people fight Voldemort.”

Fudge smiled, and Harry tried to repress the instinct that he’d done something wrong. “Excellent, Harry, thank you. We may have been late, but that’s what we’re trying to do now, and we’re pleased to know that you want to help. And that’s why Undersecretary Dentus is here. What he’s going to tell you about is something he believes is necessary to fight... Voldemort, which we know you want as well.” Harry noted that Fudge was not comfortable saying the name, but at least he made the effort.

“Excuse me, Minister, I thought Professor Dumbledore said he used to work for the Ministry, but not anymore.”

“It is a common practice, Harry, for high-level officials who are retired to still be referred to by their titles afterwards,” Dumbledore explained.

“An affectation, but it makes us feel better,” joked Dentus. “You should know, Harry, that I left the Ministry in July two years ago, shortly after Voldemort came back. I know Albus, and I knew that if he said Voldemort was back, then he was back. I quit my position in protest of the Ministry’s policies. I don’t work for the Ministry, but now that the Ministry is on board, I want to do what I can to help them.”

Harry nodded, but said nothing. He had a fairly favorable reaction to Dentus, spurred mainly by Dumbledore’s recommendation. Dentus also seemed more genuine, and didn’t talk or act like a politician.

“I’m working with the Ministry, Harry,” continued Dentus, “to try to increase security for all wizards during this dangerous time. And none are better equipped than you to understand just how dangerous it is.”

Harry smiled a bit. “I try to take the fact that Voldemort wants me dead so badly as an indication that what I’m doing is right.”

Dentus chuckled. “That’s a good attitude, Harry, but you’ll have to excuse me if I don’t wait for an attempt on my life as confirmation that what I’m doing is a good idea.”

“No, I didn’t mean to say that that was the only way to know,” said Harry. “Anyway, just what is it that you want to do?”

“The idea I support, Harry, and many prominent wizards do as well, has to do with the regulation of Apparation. You are of course aware that wizards must be licensed to Apparate, as the Ministry gave you special dispensation to Apparate early. You are also aware that the Ministry has methods of detecting various kinds of magic, including Apparation, wherever they occur.” Harry nodded, wondering where this was going.

“There have now been three attacks on Muggles in the past three weeks, and of course the attack that killed two wizards last Tuesday. These signal the beginning of a new terror offensive by Voldemort, one that could severely disrupt our society. We want to do what we can to make it more difficult for Voldemort and

his Death Eaters to conduct these attacks, and to get away after they do so. As I mentioned, we can detect Apparation, but since anyone licensed can Apparate freely, this ability helps us little when it comes to catching attacking Death Eaters. Aurors cannot arrive on the scene until there has been a report, and by that time, usually people are dead, and the perpetrators Disapparated.

“What will vastly help our security efforts, Harry, is to temporarily suspend Apparation privileges for all but specifically authorized people, such as Aurors.” Harry’s eyebrows shot up; he imagined Muggles being told they could not drive. Dentus noticed his expression. “I know it seems like a lot, Harry, but think about it. Most wizards do not, strictly speaking, need to Apparate to get around. It’s convenient, but there are fireplaces everywhere wizards normally go, and there are always brooms for the rare areas in which there are no public fireplaces, not to mention Portkeys if need be, and the Knight Bus. What would be asked of the public would be nothing worse than enduring a small inconvenience. Against that, think of what would be gained. If no one but Death Eaters were Apparating, Aurors would not have to wait for a report of an attack to respond. Ministry magic observers would detect an Apparation and alert Aurors, who would be on the scene instantly—probably soon enough to save lives, and perhaps in time to catch Death Eaters.”

“Wouldn’t they just stop Apparating, and use other types of transportation?” Harry wondered.

“Yes, they would,” agreed Dentus, “and that would mean that we would have taken a powerful weapon away from them. They would not be able to use fireplaces, because those can be monitored. They could use Portkeys, but those have to be arranged at both ends, so they would have to set one up in advance before it could be used as a means of attack or escape. We have thoroughly analyzed the possibilities, Harry. The best the Death Eaters could do would be either to fly to the scene of an attack on a broom, or set up a Portkey in a specific location prior to an attack. Then they could escape by the Portkey, or if they flew to the site on a

broom, they could escape by Disapparating, then taking a Portkey from the Apparation point to their base. It would not stop attacks; people would still be killed. Nobody claims this will solve everything. But it would slow them down, make them have to work harder to conduct attacks. It would take them extra time to reach their destinations and to prepare their getaways. It would deter casual attacks; Death Eaters wouldn't decide on a whim to go kill some people, because of the risk of being caught if they have not made preparations. Overall, it is hard not to believe that some lives would be saved. That seems more than worth the temporary inconvenience of people being unable to casually Apparate. But I'd like to know what you think of this."

Harry thought for a solid minute, in silence. He could, so far, find nothing wrong with it, and he could see that in a way, it made perfect sense. It would indeed take a weapon away from Death Eaters. He wondered about the arguments against it, and except for the obvious one, he could not think of any. "Mr. Dentus," Harry asked, "it seems like you know this issue very well, and you must know the arguments against it. If you had to argue against it, what would you say? Or, what would an opponent of it say if he was sitting here?"

Dentus glanced at Dumbledore. "He may well be," he said humorously. "That's a very good question, Harry. It's exactly what you should ask. He would first point out something I have already admitted, that the plan would not stop attacks. If he were honest, he would not dispute that it would slow them down; he might legitimately differ on how much they would be slowed down. He could argue that it would only slow them down a little, and that would not be worth the difficulty it would cause.

"The most important argument against this idea is one you must have already thought of—the unsettling thought that the government would be telling people what they can and cannot do in their private lives, taking away a privilege to which people have become accustomed. Many will argue that this will be the first of a series of increasingly harsh and restrictive measures, until finally little personal

freedom would remain. Once this is done, it could be considered a precedent for taking away other privileges, and then rights as well. As you must know from your History of Magic classes, history tells us that this is a serious concern, not to be taken lightly.

“Other arguments against this are, I feel, not truly serious. Some would say that such personal freedoms such as the right to travel should never be compromised, whatever the reason. But this is not a restriction of the right to travel, just on one particular type of travel. People could still go wherever they wanted by other means, so it is not an infringement on any personal liberties. Honestly, there is nothing else I can think of worth mentioning as an argument against it.”

Harry thought it over some more. “Well,—I’m sorry, I have a question. How private is this conversation? Can what I say be told to other people, or quoted? I don’t mean any offense,” he added quickly, noting Fudge’s darkening look. “I just don’t know how this sort of thing works.”

Amused, Dentus looked at Dumbledore. “Did you suggest he ask that?”

“I had no opportunity to confer with Harry before you arrived, Archibald. I have suggested nothing to him.”

“It was Hermione,” Harry admitted. Dentus nodded with a small smile.

“Yes, I’ve read about her in the Prophet. She sounds like someone whose advice should be taken seriously. And it is a good question, if you don’t know about this sort of thing. But no, you will not be quoted. The Minister or I may mention anything you say to colleagues, unless you specifically ask that we not do so, but you may assume that you will not be held to account for anything you say.”

Harry nodded. “Well, my first impression is that it sounds reasonable. I like the idea of taking Apparation away from them, and I would have no problem giving up the ability to casually Apparate so that this could be done. But I am concerned about the argument you raised. So I’d like to ask the Minister a question, if I could.” Fudge blinked; Harry wondered if his attention had wandered. “Minister, earlier

today I learned a phrase I hadn't known before: 'the thin end of the wedge.' My question is, if this was done, how much more of this sort of thing do you imagine would be done in the name of stopping Voldemort?"

Fudge swelled with determination and, Harry felt, a little self-importance. "Stopping him is obviously our number one priority, Harry. We will do anything we have to in order to ensure his defeat."

Harry blinked, somewhat alarmed. That hadn't been the answer he'd expected; he thought Fudge would give him bland reassurances that it wouldn't happen. Dentus visibly winced; Dumbledore remained serene.

Harry decided to press a little. "So, you could imagine that other similar measures could become necessary?"

To Dentus's credit, Harry felt, he did not intervene to try to save Fudge from himself. Looking slightly baffled, Fudge said, "Well, I can't think right now of what kind of thing could be necessary. I would recommend something, though, if it made as much sense as this makes. It's a minor loss, and a big gain."

Harry felt it was a reasonable thing to say, but it hadn't really addressed the thrust of his question. Dentus pressed on.

"I can tell you, Harry, that the people have a very strong influence over what the Ministry does. The Ministry cannot do things that are highly unpopular; our system of governance is very good in that way. If unpopular measures started being taken, the people would register their disapproval, and the measures would stop. Our government is capable of great flexibility.

"There is another reason for me to mention what I just did, Harry. This idea is not the most popular thing in the world. The Minister will not benefit politically by suggesting it; in fact, it would be a risk for him. As you no doubt have guessed, we are here to seek your public support for this. Your accomplishments have created a great reservoir of goodwill among the wizarding public. If you asked people to support this, there are many who would for that reason alone. You could

help us make wizarding society safer, and make life harder for Voldemort and his Death Eaters.”

“Well,” said Harry, “as I said, it makes sense in general to me, except for my concern that I mentioned. Why would it not be popular? If people are concerned like I am, couldn’t the Ministry reassure them that they’re aware of the danger?”

To Harry’s surprise, Dentus chuckled. “I’m sorry, Harry, I don’t mean to laugh at you, but your naiveté is showing. The reason it will not be popular is not because of the dangers you are concerned about. You assume that everyone will act with the same integrity as you would, and unfortunately, that is wrong. I’m afraid you must get used to the idea that most people are not as noble as you are.

“The problem, Harry, is that many people will react selfishly. They will think only about how the measure affects them. They will think, ‘I like Apparating, I don’t want to stop, so I’m not going to support it.’ Some people won’t even listen to the reasons for doing it, never mind giving it long and considered thought. They’ll just reject it out of hand. Or, they’ll latch onto poor reasons to reject it, as an excuse to indulge their selfishness. I’m not saying a majority will react this way, but a substantial number will, a number high enough to concern the Ministry if they suggest it. You could help reduce that number considerably.”

Harry couldn’t believe it. How could people behave like that? Didn’t they know what was at stake? Incredulous, he looked at Dumbledore. “Is that right, sir? Can that possibly be true?”

Dumbledore looked grave. “I am afraid, Harry, that what he says is quite true. I know it is hard for you to believe, but it is a part of human nature. I believe you need look no further than your Muggle relatives for evidence of this.”

Harry could not argue; he had heard enough of Vernon’s political opinions to know he would oppose anything like this which affected him personally. Still, this seemed a bit much.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” said Dentus seriously. “I feel like I just told you there was no Santa Claus. But those of us involved in politics in any way are long since



used to this fact. It tends to limit what we can do which involves asking people to make any sacrifices. Again, that's a big part of why we need you."

Harry didn't know what to say. "Professor Dumbledore, can you think of any arguments for either side that Mr. Dentus hasn't mentioned?"

"No, Harry. He has articulated them all quite thoroughly."

He thought a bit more, then said, "I didn't know people would react like this, that it would be this hard to get people to give up a convenience. It's almost amazing, when I think about that, that I've gotten so many people to say Voldemort's name."

"It is, in fact, Harry," agreed Dentus. "But amazing as what you have done is, there are still many people who will not say his name, and some of those are the ones I am talking about."

One thing Harry did know for sure was that he couldn't give them the answer they wanted, at least not right then. "Look... as I said, my first reaction is positive, but a bit concerned. But I can't give you any kind of answer tonight. I have to think it through just to decide if I support it myself, never mind tell a whole bunch of people that they should do it. I mean, I'm not that comfortable doing that. I did it for the thing about fighting Voldemort, but only because I answered questions for an interview, I wasn't going out of my way to talk to people. I just did what I thought was right."

"I know," said Dentus, his respect clear on his face. "And that is what Minister Fudge is here trying to do. Believe me when I say, for a politician to try to do what is right is often not an easy thing. They tend to get punished for it."

"To be honest, Harry, I'd rather not do this," said Fudge, and Harry found that he believed him. "I'd rather tell people, we'll take care of... Voldemort, you can go on about your lives. But people tell me this would be important, and I can't ignore that. It's not that much we're asking. One Prophet interview is all it would take, we would take it from there."

Harry shook his head. "It's not the trouble that makes me hesitate, Minister. I would do much more to keep people safe. I just need to be comfortable with it first. Like I said, I'm not comfortable with the idea that I should be telling people what to do."

McGonagall opened the office door. "Excuse me, Headmaster, would you step out here for a moment, please?" Raising an eyebrow slightly, Dumbledore excused himself, and got up and left with McGonagall. Harry had the impression that Dumbledore was not often called out of his own office.

"I understand that," said Dentus. "But you must understand the substantial influence you have. Saying Voldemort's name is very hard for many people—harder than giving up Apparating, by far—but you managed to convince many people to do it. It would be a waste of your stature not to use it to help do something like this. I mean, it isn't just Chocolate Frog cards, Harry."

Harry looked defensive. "I didn't ask for that," he said.

Dentus nodded. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply that you did. I get the feeling that you don't even care that much. I just mean that there are rewards to being famous and honored as you are, and there are also responsibilities. In a way, Harry, I feel bad even asking you for this. You're only sixteen, and can't be expected to have strong opinions on subjects like this, not to mention that you've done far more than your share, carried huge burdens. It's just that, and again nobody knows this better than you, we're in a difficult situation, and anything that can help us save lives—"

Dumbledore stepped back into the room. "I'm sorry, Cornelius, Archibald, but we shall have to end this meeting. An emergency has come up, and Harry's presence is required elsewhere."

"What has happened?" asked Dentus.

"I believe you both know that Harry is very close to the Weasley family," said Dumbledore. "He and they both consider him to be a part of their family. A Weasley family emergency has arisen, and Harry must be with them."

Harry felt a surge of dread. Please, he thought, let nothing have happened to Arthur and Molly, or the twins, or—

“There has been an attack outside a restaurant frequented by Ministry wizards, Harry,” said Dumbledore solemnly. “Two wizards and a witch were killed by Death Eaters. One of them was Percy Weasley.”

Harry was stunned. He didn’t say anything, and didn’t move. He heard Dumbledore say, “Cornelius, Archibald, I am sorry, but I will need the use of my office. Minerva is fetching the other Weasley children, and she will attend to you after she has returned with them.”

Fudge and Dentus nodded, rose, and headed out. As he passed Harry, Dentus said, “I’m sorry, Harry.” Harry didn’t react. The door closed, and Harry was alone with Dumbledore. Neither spoke. Harry didn’t know how long it had been, but the door opened, and Ron and Ginny walked in. They, too, had dread on their faces; McGonagall had clearly not told them, but they knew that the last time Weasleys had been collected like this, their father had almost died.

Dumbledore faced them and told them exactly what he had told Harry. He saw Ron and Ginny react in almost exactly the same way as he had, with stunned looks and almost no visible reaction. Dumbledore was quiet for a moment, then said, “The other family members are being gathered, and a Portkey is being set up at the Weasley residence. You will go there once that is done. Excuse me, I will return when it is ready.” He left his office, leaving the three alone.

Harry exchanged looks with the other two; nobody said anything for a moment. Then Ginny said, hesitantly, “Are you two thinking the same thing that I’m thinking? I hope you are, because if you’re not, then it means I’m a terrible person.”

Ron looked down, then at her. “I think I am. I guess you mean, something like, if it had to be someone in the family...” She nodded, and they both looked at Harry.

“You’re a good person, Ginny,” Harry said quietly. “When Dumbledore interrupted the meeting with Fudge, he said there was a Weasley family emergency. I knew what it meant. I started thinking, don’t let it be your parents, or the twins... and soon, Percy was the only person I hadn’t named in my mind, and just as soon as I thought that, Dumbledore said his name. Then I felt somehow responsible, as though I had wished it on him. I know it’s stupid.”

She nodded. “I feel so guilty for even thinking it, I just can’t help it. He was never mean to me, he was just... being Percy...” She started to sob, stepped up to Ron, and hugged him.

Looking extremely somber, he held her. “It’s not your fault, Ginny,” he said softly. “We can’t help what we think.” Harry felt that Ron, however, did not look all that comfortable with what he was thinking, either.

Ginny stopped crying and dried her eyes. “Mum’s going to be destroyed,” she said sadly. “Bad enough for it to happen to any of us, but the one who they had a rift with... it’s doubly bad, not only did he die, but they never got a chance to put it together, to make it right.”

Ron nodded. “Now I feel bad for saying—thank goodness I never said it to Mum—that I didn’t care if Percy rejoined the family. I mean, I meant it, but I didn’t think about this happening, how we would feel. I should have, with Voldemort around.”

“Percy wasn’t deliberately targeted, was he? Because he was a Weasley...” she trailed off. Harry knew she was thinking of their connection to him. He closed his eyes.

“Oh, Harry, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said or thought that,” she said. “I was just thinking out loud... I shouldn’t do that.”

Harry shook his head. “It’s okay, Ginny. You’re not the only one who’s going to wonder. Dumbledore didn’t say, and they probably don’t know. But I don’t think so. Dumbledore said that Voldemort doesn’t think to kill family members for

that kind of reason. Considering where it happened, I think it was just coincidence that he happened to be a Weasley.” I hope to God that’s true, he thought fervently.

“We probably shouldn’t try to say too much to Mum,” she said. “We shouldn’t even try to say anything to try to make her feel better, because it’s not going to happen. We should hug her, try to do things for her—but she may want to do things herself, too, to be doing something—and just be supportive, but there’s just nothing we can say. It’s like it was with you last June, Harry. We wanted so badly to do something to help, but we knew we couldn’t. You just needed time, and it’ll be that way for Mum, too. Probably quite a bit of time. They say there’s nothing worse than losing a child, and I believe it.”

Harry nodded, and told them about her experience with the boggart a year and a half ago. “Don’t tell her I told you, but this is how bad it is for her.”

“I wonder if she’ll be mad at us,” said Ron. “You know, for not being more willing to take Percy back.”

“If she is, she’ll take it out on Dad, he was the one most opposed to dealing with Percy,” pointed out Ginny.

“Oh, I hope she doesn’t do that,” said Harry. “It’s not like it won’t be terrible for him, too. He may regret more than anyone not talking to Percy.”

They fell silent for a minute, then Dumbledore entered the room. “The Portkey has been set up,” he said. “Security for the Burrow has been arranged. We will not expect you for classes tomorrow. Your classes will be made up next week, Harry, and if you wish, I will send your regrets to the Aurors for Saturday.”

“No,” Harry said, quickly. He hadn’t even thought about it, but he knew what he wanted. “I’ll do the Saturday training, as usual. I’m fighting to stop just this sort of thing. I think the Weasleys will understand why I don’t want to take a break from it.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I thought you might feel that way,” he said. “Lastly, Hermione tracked me down just now. She wants you all to know how sorry she is, though she knows you would know anyway. She also gave me this to give to you.”

He produced Hermione's notebook which she used to communicate with Pansy. "She did not say to whom it should go."

"I'll take it," said Ron, standing nearest to Dumbledore, who handed it to him. Dumbledore gestured to the Portkey. Harry, Ron, and Ginny touched it together, and found themselves in the kitchen at the Burrow. Fawkes materialized, and perched on Harry's shoulder. They could hear Molly crying in the living room, and they headed in.

All the rest of the family was there. Molly was on the sofa, crying on Bill, who was holding her. Arthur was on her other side, Charlie next to him. Fred and George were in chairs near the sofa. Molly saw the three of them enter the room, and still crying, got up and walked to them. She hugged Ron first, then Ginny, then Harry. Her hugs were much stronger than usual, gripping each child as if in thanks that she still had them. Harry guided her back to the sofa, where she sat, now being held by her husband. Harry, Ron, and Ginny pulled up chairs and sat, as Fawkes started singing.

No one said anything for about ten minutes, at which point Molly stopped crying. "It's strange," she said as she blew her nose, "I feel like I could cry all night long, but my body won't let me. It just has to stop at some point."

Harry nodded. "That's how it was for me, after Hogsmeade, when I woke up. I still felt like I wanted to cry, after I don't know how long, but I couldn't."

"You poor dear," she said. "At least I don't have to feel responsible for this. For other things, maybe, but I know he would have died no matter what his situation with us was."

"You weren't responsible for that, Mum," said Fred. "He was. He left us, he made his decision. Don't get me wrong, I feel terrible that he's dead. I feel terrible that we weren't on good terms with him when it happened. But you can't go blaming yourself. You did the best you could, you did more than any of us."

Molly looked like she might cry again. "I raised him," she said. "I praised him, I encouraged his ambition. He embraced it so much, and I was so proud of him. I never stopped to think of the negative side of it."

"Mum, that was him, that wasn't you," argued Ron. "I don't know, but I feel like we're born a certain way, with a certain personality. I mean, look at Fred and George. They've been making jokes for as long as I can remember. Do you think they got that from you? Or Harry, he's got so many good qualities you can't even list them all, he was chosen by a phoenix, for goodness' sake. Do you think he got any of that from his aunt and uncle? We are how we are, and Percy was ambitious. He would have been even if you'd discouraged it, I'm sure. He just... made a wrong choice at some point. There's nothing you could have done about it."

"You're right, of course, Ron," said Harry. "But I know how Molly feels. I blamed myself for Hogsmeade, I guess it's just natural to do that."

Molly reached out to Harry, meaning she wanted him to come over to the sofa. He did, as Bill moved aside, and Harry sat where he had been. Molly pulled Harry into a hug, and then started crying again. Harry just held her, and it was silent again, except for Molly's sobs and Fawkes's song.

After a while, Ron went upstairs, but the rest stayed in the living room, talking at times, silent at others, taking turns comforting Molly. Arthur didn't cry; Harry wondered what he was going through, and how he was dealing with it. At one point, about three hours after they'd arrived at the Burrow, Arthur asked Harry about the meeting with Fudge. "I'd heard at the Ministry that they were going to see you, and about what. Had you finished talking to them when this happened?"

"Almost," said Harry. "I think we were just about finished." Harry then explained to the others what had been discussed, and Arthur asked him what he thought. "It seemed like a good idea," he said. "It would slow them down, and after what happened tonight, it seems like an even better idea. It would make it harder for them to do this kind of thing. I would support it completely if I could trust the

Ministry not to slide down the slippery slope. But I don't trust them at all, so I have to decide just how much I don't trust them, compared to the good this could do. I was going to ask what you and Molly thought. I need advice and help."

"I'm sorry, Harry, but you're not going to get it from me," said Molly, looking angry. "Right now, I'd support the use of the Cruciatus Curse on captured Death Eaters. I don't mean to get information, I mean just to make them suffer. So I'm not a good person to ask right now."

Harry could understand that. "Believe me, Molly, I wasn't going to ask now. I meant, I was going to before this happened."

The hours trickled by. After four in the morning, Charlie Apparated back to his home, saying he'd be back when he got up. Bill stayed, as did the twins, but they fell asleep in their chairs; Harry couldn't help noting that they always seemed to do the same thing, even if it was fall asleep. He and Ginny sat next to Molly on the sofa. At one point, Ginny fell asleep on Harry's shoulder. She awakened when he moved, and went upstairs to the bathroom. When she came back down, she whispered to Harry, "I peeked in at Ron when I passed by on the way back. He's in his room, lights out, but the desk light by his bed on. He's writing to Pansy, that's what he's been doing for the past... what is it, over six hours now."

"How is she doing that?" Harry marveled in a whisper. "She's going to be falling asleep in her classes tomorrow. But it's really good of her."

"I thought so too," she said. "Probably it's good for Ron to talk to someone not that close to the family, so he can be more honest about his feelings. Also, I've written to Pansy in that book, and there's something about it that encourages you to talk about stuff you wouldn't normally. I'd say that's good for Ron too."

Harry nodded in agreement. She whispered, "Now, where was I..." She snuggled against Harry's shoulder as if it were a pillow, trying to get comfortable; he put an arm around her. The physical contact was a comfort to both of them. Harry found himself wondering how much that was true for Arthur and Molly, next to him on the sofa, or if they were too deeply in grief to notice much else.



Harry didn't end up sleeping at all, spending the last few hours of the night talking to Molly, Arthur, Ginny, and Bill, listening to them talk about Percy. Molly had bouts of crying intermittently, during one of which the twins woke up, again together, and stayed awake, joining the conversation. At about six o'clock, Arthur and Molly went up to their bedroom. Harry assumed it was to talk privately; he very much doubted that either one would be sleeping any time soon. Bill went into the kitchen to make some breakfast, and Fred and George sat next to Harry and Ginny on the sofa.

"What's up with Ron?" asked George.

Ginny shrugged. "You could ask him," she said indifferently. Harry was pleased that she didn't want to violate Ron's privacy.

"Nah, he's probably sleeping by now," said George. "We wanted to know what you really thought."

"What do you mean, 'what we really thought?'" asked Harry, but he had a feeling he did know.

"I kind of exaggerated to Mum before, using the word 'terrible,'" explained Fred. "I wish it hadn't happened, and I'm especially sad for Mum, so I'm trying to be nice. But just because Percy's dead doesn't make him a saint or something. It doesn't change what he did. If we're going to mourn him, let's mourn who he really was."

"And that's why I said, we want to know what you two think," added George.

Harry waited for Ginny to go first. "I don't know, but I kind of feel the same as you," she said. "I think Ron does too. We thought about how it would affect Mum before how it affected us. The sad truth is, even before Percy turned his back on us, we hardly had any kind of relationship with him. You know how formal and distant he always was, I feel like he was sort of the black sheep of the family, the answer to the question 'which one of these doesn't belong?' So for me, it was

hard to say I knew him so well. I almost feel sadder that I didn't really know who he was inside and I'll never have the chance than anything else. Maybe he would have become a better person later on."

"You're a bit generous, Ginny, but I suppose we can't know you're wrong. Harry, how about you?"

Harry reflexively looked around before answering. "I can't have the same view as you, not being a natural-born member of the family, not spending most of my life around him. What I remember most was that month I spent here before second year, when you broke me out of the Dursleys' with that car." Fred and George exchanged a grin at the memory. "Everyone in the family made me feel at home, except him..."

"Not me," Ginny interrupted. "I must have made you feel like, what in the world is wrong with her?" Harry smiled, as did the twins.

"Not that he was nasty or anything," Harry continued. "But you know what I mean, he couldn't be natural like everyone else. He never let you see beneath the mask."

"What's a bit scary is that we think the mask was all there was," said Fred.

"No way," said Ginny. "There was a person there somewhere, with feelings, fantasies, whatever makes us who we are. We did get glimpses occasionally."

"That's true, remember the first time we won the Quidditch Cup? He was going crazy just like everyone else," recalled Harry. "I think that was the only time I saw it, though."

"But how do you feel, Harry?" asked George.

Harry looked at the twins with an expression that suggested that he didn't want to answer the question. They exchanged a glance. "That's what we thought," said Fred.

"I'm sad that he's dead," Harry clarified, "but it's as if it happened to a stranger. What makes me really sad is how it affects your parents."

“Us too, Harry,” agreed Fred. “And part of me is mad at Percy for making this worse for them than it otherwise would be. If it had been one of us, it would have just been grief. But with him, it’s that and the unresolved conflict.”

“And the feeling that he rejected them,” added George.

Ginny looked impressed. “I didn’t know you could be so sensitive.”

“We admit, humor is our mask,” said Fred. “But at least it’s a much nicer mask than Percy’s. And we know it’s a mask, and we can take it off if we want to. For example, Ginny, I want you to know that if it had been you, we would have been crying right along with Mum.” Ginny gratefully threw her arms around Fred. George added, “And that’s true for you, too, Harry.”

Harry smiled sadly. “I know, and thank you. And it’s the same for me with you, of course,” he said, as Ginny now hugged George.

“We really appreciated what you said in the Prophet about us,” said Fred. “About us looking out for you. We just sort of did it, we weren’t that conscious about it. You just seemed like the kind of person we should want to help. But it seems that’s not an uncommon feeling.” He reached over to pet Fawkes, who was perched on the back of the sofa.

“And if it means we pounded a few Slytherins with our Bludgers, or our bats, then it’s all the better,” added George.

“Speaking of Fawkes, the sixth years had their phoenix lessons today,” said Ginny, now smiling. “I heard all about it, both the Ravenclaw/Slytherin lesson and the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff one.” She spent the next five minutes telling Fred and George the details she’d heard, their laughter punctuating her story. They tried to keep their laughter down, though, not wanting to offend their parents. “So,” she went on, nearing the conclusion, “the Ravenclaws had heard about the Firebolt, so they started asking Hagrid—“

”What do you mean, ‘heard about the Firebolt?’“ interrupted Fred.

“Everyone knows Harry has a Firebolt,” added George.

Harry and Ginny exchanged surprised looks. "They don't know?" he asked. She gestured for him to go ahead and tell them. "Well, yesterday was Ron's birthday, as you know. I got him a Firebolt."

Harry enjoyed the expressions on the twins' faces. They were speechless for a moment. Finally, Fred said, "Harry, I think it is safe to say that you are one of a kind."

"Ron must've been over the moon," mused George.

"He was pretty happy," agreed Ginny. "But he's going to let me use it for Quidditch practice and games, since he's a Keeper."

They raised their eyebrows. "Practical, yet generous," said George.

"You'll take the Cup for sure now, even if Harry takes longer than twelve seconds to get the Snitch," said Fred.

They talked about Quidditch and the Firebolt for a while, and the twins asked more about the Care of Magical Creatures lessons, which Harry reluctantly described, to the twins' great amusement. Soon thereafter, Bill came in and said, "There's breakfast for anyone who wants it. Is Ron up?"

"I'll go check," said Harry. He knew that even if Ron was still talking to Pansy, he couldn't continue for long, as it would not be long before she would have to go to the Great Hall for breakfast. He walked up the stairs quietly so as not to disturb anyone who might be sleeping.

He silently walked into Ron's bedroom. Ron was sprawled out on the bed, asleep, obviously not having intended to fall asleep in that position. The notebook and pen were near his hand. Harry picked them up, and saw writing on the left side of the book. He saw the words, "Ron? Ron?"

He sat down and wrote, "Are you still there, Pansy?"

The reply came back almost immediately. "Yes, is that you, Ron? The handwriting looks different."

"No, it's me, Harry. I came up to see if Ron wanted breakfast, and he had fallen asleep while writing. None of us have really slept here."

“I can imagine. I was going to have to go for breakfast in a bit, I’m glad you let me know what had happened. He hadn’t answered for a few minutes.”

“It was really nice of you to do this. You gave up a whole night’s sleep.”

“I don’t mind at all, as I told him three times. He kept asking me if I was sure I didn’t want to go to bed. It was great. It was an amazing talk. He really opened up, told me all kinds of stuff. Like you do, but I didn’t expect it of him.”

“I’m really glad. I’m sure he needed it. You were there for him, like you were there for me after Hogsmeade.”

“(blush) Thank you, Harry. How are you doing?”

“Tired, but mostly okay. I’m sure Ron told you, we’re mostly sad for Molly and Arthur. It’s like, we really feel bad that we don’t feel really bad.”

“Yes, Ron told me. I remember Percy a little, what he was like. Ron told me he hardly knew him better than I did. That’s so sad.”

“Yes, Ginny and I and the twins were talking about it downstairs. Molly and Arthur went to their room an hour ago, and we’ve been talking since then. They feel the same way. By the way, are you going to be okay today? Malfoy’s going to notice there’s something wrong.”

“Don’t worry. If I’m really bad, I’ll skive off a class or two. I think I’ll be okay, though. As for Malfoy, if he notices anything, I’ll just hint that it’s my time of the month. He won’t ask any more questions.”

“(laugh) I’ll bet. You must have been really surprised to open up the notebook last night and find out it was Ron.”

“Yes, I was amazed at first. I hadn’t heard about Percy, he told me how he got it. That was so thoughtful of Hermione.”

“Yes, it was. It’s the kind of thing I’ve come to expect from her.”

“I know what you mean. Look, before I go, I wanted to say, in case he doesn’t... he feels awful about what he said earlier. He brought it up twice, said he really wished he could take it back. I just wanted to make sure you knew that.”

“I know, but I’m not bothered anymore. Part of me feels like I deserved it, like I needed to be reminded that I need to look at that kind of decision thinking about how it affects the rest of you, not only me. I mean, I dragged the rest of you into this campaign.”

“You didn’t drag us, we decided to come. Hermione would give you a long lecture about it, but I’m afraid I don’t have time, I have to go to breakfast soon. But she was right. You just do what you think is right, let us worry about the rest. And you did not, repeat not, deserve it. I would feel the same way as him if I had said it. But if you think about it, what it really means is that he cares about you so much that he’d go to any length to keep you safe.”

“I know, maybe that’s also part of the reason I’m not mad at him. Now I feel like I’m just lucky to have him, to have all of you.”

“I’m glad, Harry, and I’m proud to be included in that. But I’m afraid I have to go, I’ll miss breakfast if I don’t go soon. I’ll be thinking of you today, all of you.”

“I know, Pansy, and thank you. You’re a very good friend.”

“You too, Harry. See you later.”

“Bye,” Harry wrote, and closed the book. He put it and the pen on the desk near Ron’s bed, and headed back downstairs. He joined the others. “He’s asleep.”

The twins raised their eyebrows. “Your powers of observation are slipping, Harry, if it took you five minutes to determine that,” smiled Fred.

“Just a few things I wanted to do before eating,” said Harry. The twins resumed their conversation with Bill, and Harry and Ginny exchanged a significant look. He was sure Ginny knew what he had been doing.

Friday went by in a kind of haze for Harry, even though he did catch two hours of sleep in the early afternoon. Quite a few people were in and out of the Weasleys’ fireplace, as friends and Arthur’s colleagues came by to pay their respects. Tonks and Kingsley came by, and Harry told them he would be there the next day as usual. They were surprised, but understood his reasons, as did Arthur and Molly.

At around five-thirty, Harry was lying in the extra bed in Ron's room, but not sleeping. Ron came in; it was the first time they'd spoken privately since last night.

"Are you sleeping, or hiding?" Ron asked.

"Hiding," Harry replied. "I did greet some people with your mother earlier, but this is one of those times that it's not so good to be Harry Potter. Everybody has something to say to me. It's always positive, of course, I'm not complaining, it's just... kind of draining. So I'm hiding. How about you?"

"I don't get the Harry Potter treatment, but it's the usual stuff. We're so sorry about your brother, like that. I feel like I should pretend I'm sadder than I really am. And like you say, that's draining too."

Sitting up, Harry nodded his understanding. "How do you feel now?"

Ron thought a moment. "About the same, I guess. Sometimes it's hard to know what to think, since there's such a difference in the relationship we had—being brothers—and our actual relationship, which, well, there almost wasn't one. That's what makes this kind of hard."

"I'm glad you were able to talk to Pansy. I'm sure it helped."

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Were you the one who—"

"Yes, I came up to tell you about breakfast, and you had fallen asleep. She was still there, so I picked up the notebook and let her know what had happened. We talked for a few minutes, and then she had to go to breakfast."

Ron looked a little nervous, but it seemed to go away quickly. "Good. I felt bad for falling asleep when I woke up. Did she tell you what we talked about?"

"No, no details. Just that you opened up, but I could have guessed that. You weren't up here for seven or eight hours writing about nothing."

"Guess that makes sense," Ron allowed. "It really helped. It was... very good of her to talk for that long. I mean, I wasn't going to be going to sleep anyway. She was, but she still stayed up."

“I know her well enough now to not be surprised, but yes, I told her that I thought it was really good of her too. She said she was happy to do it, and I could tell that she was, she said it was a ‘great’ conversation. Let me ask you, when Hermione gave us the book, do you think she had one of us in mind?”

“I asked her that, and she said she didn’t think so, just that Hermione must have thought that one of us would need it more than she would. I was glad to talk to her, because... downstairs, we couldn’t really talk. I did feel kind of bad about leaving, but I figured there were more than enough people, they wouldn’t notice one missing.”

“I don’t think they did, really,” agreed Harry. “Nobody mentioned it, anyway.”

“I don’t want them to think I don’t care,” said Ron. “There just wasn’t much I could do, anyway.” He sat down on his bed, thinking. “This is so strange. I still don’t know what I should be thinking. I mean, Pansy said there’s nothing I should be thinking, that I think what I think. I’m sure she’s right—after all, I said something similar to Ginny—but I still feel this way.”

“I know what you mean. I could be wrong—and I feel that way too—but maybe it’s because we don’t feel how we’re ‘supposed’ to feel, so it’s as if we don’t trust our actual feelings, but we just question them. We can’t say them, except to each other. We can’t tell anyone who we think might tell others.”

Ron nodded. “I think she actually said something like that... it’s almost hard to remember, we talked so long. Anyway, I guess we’re stuck with it. Have you talked about it with Ginny and the twins?”

“After your parents went to bed, at about six, we all talked, and we all felt pretty much the same way. By the way, the twins asked about you. Ginny knew what you were doing, but she acted like she didn’t.”

Ron chuckled. “She wants to encourage me, I’m sure. Doesn’t want them making fun of me for something like this. I don’t think they would, not at a time



like this, but she's just being careful. The fact is, though, I'm pretty well beyond caring if they make fun of me or not."

"I think she's just respecting your privacy, is the main thing. I mean, she told me, of course, but that's different."

They were silent for a moment. Then Ron sighed. "Poor Mum and Dad... they didn't deserve this. You know... and I told Pansy this... I'm kind of mad at Percy for leaving it this way, because it just makes it harder for them."

"Fred and George said the same thing," said Harry. "I bet your father feels that way too, but he'd never say it to anyone. This has to have been so hard for him... and what makes it worse is that everybody at the Ministry knew what was going on, and now everybody will look at him when he goes back and know exactly what he's been through. So if I'm mad at Percy for anything, it's what he did to your father."

"And we're not supposed to be mad at people who just died," said Ron. "But we are anyway. And you know what else..." Ron looked as if he both wanted to and didn't want to say something. "This is really terrible... and I told Pansy this too, but... there's a little part of me that's unhappy that this happened on my birthday. Not because it messed up my day or anything, but there'll always be this... association. It'll always be my birthday, and the day Percy died. And I didn't even like him." He looked at Harry, obviously feeling very guilty. "That's awful, isn't it?"

Harry's heart went out to Ron. He shook his head. "That's how you feel, Ron. We can't only have the kind of feelings we're proud of. We're human, we have all of them. I guess we just have to recognize them and accept them."

"I suppose so... I guess I just have to live with it, with myself. Maybe it'll make me a better person, who knows."

"You're already a good person, Ron. I should know, and you should trust my judgment. I was chosen by a phoenix, after all." Ron chuckled, then Harry did too.

"I thought that just meant that you were a good person," Ron said.

“Yes, but if you’re my friend, then that says something about you, too,” Harry said, half-seriously.

“Ah, it’s goodness through association,” Ron surmised. He got up from his bed, walked to the center of the room, and gave Harry a look. Not sure if he was understanding it correctly, Harry slowly got up, and took a step toward Ron. Ron reached out to Harry and pulled him into an embrace. “Thank you, Harry,” Ron said. He didn’t say for what, but Harry understood.

“Any time, Ron,” he said. “You’ve been there for me, lots of times.” A few seconds later, Harry said, “Where’s Malfoy when you need him?” They both laughed, and slowly broke the embrace.

“So, are you ready to come out of hiding and come with me downstairs? A few of Mum’s friends are down there, they’re doing some cooking. Dinner should be pretty soon.”

“All right, let’s go,” Harry agreed. He followed Ron downstairs, feeling a little better than he had all day.

Exhaustion having caught up with them, no one in the Weasley family went to sleep that night later than nine o’clock. Harry went downstairs after waking up Saturday morning and gave Molly, who was cooking breakfast, a long hug. He found himself wondering if she could detect their ambivalent feelings about Percy, and if she would ask.

Breakfast was eaten in relative silence. Fred and George were still there; they had decided that they would open the shop, and each would do a half-day while the other stayed at the Burrow. Harry told them he felt a little bad for going, and they all admonished him not to. “If you end up catching the scum who did this, Harry, I’ll be very happy,” said Molly. Then she paused, and said, “Well, maybe not happy. I can’t imagine being happy right now. I would be satisfied.”

The Aurors greeted Harry somberly, as did Neville; they all gave him their condolences, and a few said things showing they understood the unusual situation

the Weasleys were in. They had their normal morning training, and broke for lunch shortly after noon. As they sat down, Tonks said, “So, Harry, we heard you met with Fudge. How did it go?”

“I was just going to ask that,” said Neville. “What did they want?”

Harry answered, and explained the issue a bit for Neville’s benefit; he knew the Aurors would be well versed in it. “So,” he concluded, “I can see it’s a good idea and will be helpful. But I don’t trust the Ministry not to abuse any power I help them get. So I’m still not sure what I’m going to do. I want to know what people have to say about it, and of course, I wanted to ask all of you. So tell me what you think.”

“Well, Harry,” answered Kingsley, “It’s safe to say we support the idea; I don’t think there’s a single one of us who doesn’t. It would affect us most directly, and most favorably. As you know, and not to be overly dramatic, but we’re the ones who put our lives on the line every time we Apparate out to the scene of a situation. Anything we can do to slow them down is a big plus. It’s true that this won’t stop attacks, but Dentus is right, it’ll deter casual ones. Every less situation we have to Apparate into on no notice is one less where innocent people die, one less where one of us might be killed. To us, this is a no-brainer.”

“And you’re not worried about the possibility of it leading to worse things?” Harry asked.

“The problem is, Harry,” said Tonks, “is that it’s like saying you should never have a drop of alcohol, because you might become an alcoholic, or you should never gamble even once, because you might become a compulsive gambler.” She paused and grinned at her colleagues. “You can’t take absolute positions, not in real life. There are always balances to be weighed, and in this case, there’s no contest. People really don’t need to Apparate. We really need to slow down Voldemort. It’s pretty simple.”

“But Harry is right, the Ministry can’t be trusted,” said Jack. “Who knows what they’ll do next, Harry said Fudge nearly admitted as much. And we all know how Fudge is, he’d do anything that was popular at the time.”

“Yes, but he’s doing this, and it’s not popular,” pointed out Kingsley. “We should encourage it by giving him support in doing something unpopular. The only reason we haven’t supported it publicly yet is that he hasn’t proposed it. When you read the article in which it’s announced, you’ll see the phrase ‘the full support of the Auror community.’”

“In that case,” countered Jack, “the ‘Auror community’ had better keep our eyes on what they do after that, because then it gets easier. What if the next thing is intercepting owls, or even searching people’s homes? We may not be in favor of that, but another politically important group could be. If we support this, we’re obligated to be vigilant, to make sure it doesn’t get worse.”

Harry looked confused. “I thought you said that all the Aurors supported it,” he said to Kingsley.

Jack answered. “I do, Harry. I just take it upon myself to be the local contrarian. I take the opposite side of an issue if no one else will, just for practice. But I do believe what I say. We can’t just give the Ministry support, then close our eyes.”

“Jack has a good point, of course,” agreed Kingsley. “And we will keep an eye on things. One thing about Aurors, we always keep an ear to the ground politically, we kind of have to.”

“Do you think the whole Auror community appreciates the danger?” asked Harry.

Tonks shrugged. “You don’t have to have an O.W.L. in History of Magic to be an Auror, but most of us are pretty well educated. I’d say we have a better-than-average understanding of the issues here.”

“Look, Harry, we don’t want to pressure you,” Kingsley assured him. “You’re only sixteen, you’re not experienced at this sort of thing. Coming out in

favor of this, though we want it, isn't something we would have asked of you. It's not going to affect your relationship with us if you don't do it. You should do what you're comfortable with."

"No, no, you're not pressuring me," said Harry. "I wanted to know what you thought, and if you have a strong opinion about it, then I take that very seriously. As you say, you're the ones who this affects most strongly. That matters to me."

"Thank you, Harry," said Tonks. "We like you too." Most everyone at the table chuckled.

Neville spoke up. "What does Professor Dumbledore think, Harry?"

"I don't know. He didn't give an opinion at the meeting, and I didn't have a chance to ask him afterwards, because the Percy thing happened right after that. I'm going to ask him when I get back to Hogwarts."

"Ten Galleons says he opposes it," offered Tonks.

The other Aurors at the table chuckled. "Don't think you'll find any takers, Tonks, even if you give odds," said Temble.

"Five to one?" she suggested. The others shook their heads. "You'd have to go to twenty to one before I'd even think about it," said Kingsley.

Harry was confused. "I'm sorry, I don't know much about odds. Does this mean that you all think he's going to oppose it?"

"Yes, Harry, that's what we think," said Kingsley. "Don't get us wrong, we have tremendous respect for Professor Dumbledore. He's a great man, no question. But he's known as an absolutist when it comes to this kind of thing. He would sacrifice lives for principle. I can respect that attitude, but I can't agree with it, and most people don't, either. Most of us feel, as Tonks said, that there should be a balance."

"Is that why," asked Neville, "he doesn't throw Malfoy out of Hogwarts even though it's obvious he's going to try to kill Harry at some point?"

Harry was startled; it wasn't like Neville to be so outspoken, never mind in opposition to Dumbledore. Seeing Harry's expression, Neville continued, "I've

talked about this with Hermione, Harry. She feels strongly about principle, she's closer to him on this than I am. But even she would throw him out, even without a reason."

"You seem not to need an answer to your question, Neville, but yes, that's why," replied Kingsley. "Needless to say, any of us would have thrown Malfoy out by now."

"I would've used the Confundus Beam as an excuse," said Tonks. "And it wouldn't even be that thin an excuse. Use of a potentially debilitating weapon against a Hogwarts teacher?"

"When it happened," Harry explained, "he said that it couldn't be considered an assault on a teacher, because it happened on the Quidditch pitch, where since I play for Gryffindor I can't be considered a teacher."

This was greeted by a few snorts and a general shaking of heads. "Technically, he's right," conceded Kingsley. "But most of us live in the real world, where people suffer and die because bad guys aren't dealt with properly. He feels so strongly about this that he's willing to risk your life over it, important as you are."

"Do you guys know how he feels about me?" asked Harry, curious.

Kingsley nodded. "My understanding is that he loves you like a son, which makes his actions all the more impressive. No one's questioning his sincerity, Harry. We know he would prefer to risk himself over these principles rather than you. And who knows, maybe at the end of the day he's right. Maybe if everyone stuck so closely to principle, fewer lives would be lost in the long run. Or you could argue that even if that's not true, principles are still worth dying for. That gets into values, and even mysticism. Maybe spiritually, dying for principle is particularly noble, and you get extra credit in the afterlife, if there is one. Any of that could be true. Also, there's the man himself, his greatness is just self-evident. I assume you feel the same way about him?" Harry nodded. "So if I were you, I might also let him risk my life over principle, just because if it meant that much to him, I'd want to honor that. It's just that most people wouldn't do what he's doing."

“Most people don’t have a phoenix, either, Kingsley,” pointed out Jack. “You know what it means to be chosen by a phoenix. Don’t you think that maybe we should listen to him a bit more carefully, with that in mind?”

Kingsley shook his head. “I already factored that in, Jack. I said he was a great man, and Fawkes is reflected in that. But even a great man can be wrong on any given issue, and he’s the first to say he’s not perfect.”

“Harry,” asked Neville, “suppose you were the headmaster, or let’s say you had the power to expel people, and there was a student you knew beyond any doubt would try to kill Hermione as soon as he got the chance, and you were sure he’d eventually get the chance. Would you expel him, even without a good reason?”

The room was silent as Harry thought about it. “Yes, Neville, I would,” he said quietly. “But that doesn’t mean he’s wrong. Maybe it just means I’m not strong enough.”

“If that’s true, Harry, then I hope you never are,” said Neville firmly. “I know it doesn’t mean he’s wrong. But it also doesn’t mean you’re wrong. All I know is, I don’t know how he can expose someone he loves to that kind of risk when it’s in his power to prevent it. I couldn’t.”

Two days later, Harry finished recounting the conversation to Dumbledore, as the portraits of past headmasters listened attentively.

“I respect Neville’s opinion, and those of the Aurors,” he said. “No one can say they are wrong. It is simply a matter of judgment, and we each must make our own. For example, you have not said so yet, but I observe that you have decided to publicly support the measure restricting Apparation, but you hesitate to make your decision final, as you have not yet had my input. The fact is that you do not need it. I would tell you if there was more information which you needed but did not have, but there is not. You know the benefits, you know the dangers, you simply must weigh them. I would not attempt to persuade you, or to substitute my judgment for yours. We must each make our own decisions in such matters.”

Harry breathed deeply. "I know what you're going to say before I even say this, but... I feel as though if I don't make the same decision that you would have made, then I made the wrong one. I know I shouldn't think that way, though."

"Quite true, though I cannot deny being flattered that you feel that way," said Dumbledore, amused.

Harry smiled. "I'm glad, sir. By the way, I do want to talk to Mr. Dentus before I make a final decision. Do you know how I can talk to him privately?"

"Yes, Harry, your office has a fireplace. I believe you used it a few times last year, when it was not your office. I will give you the name of his fireplace, and you can simply talk to him through that, if he is there. He has no specific job right now, so I believe it likely you will find him available." He wrote down the information on a piece of paper, and Harry took it.

Twenty minutes later, his head was in a fireplace, and he saw Dentus sit in a chair facing his fireplace. "Harry! This is quite a surprise. What can I do for you?"

"Well, Mr. Dentus, I—"

"Please call me Archibald, Harry."

Harry blinked; Dentus smiled. "Harry, you may be only sixteen, but what you have done makes you more than worthy to be treated with the same respect as any accomplished adult. You might as well get used to it."

"If you say so... Archibald."

"You were going to say 'sir,' weren't you, Harry?"

Now Harry smiled. "I guess some habits are hard to break. Anyway, there were a few things I wanted to talk to you about, that I didn't get to last Thursday but I couldn't have asked you at that time anyway."

"Because the Minister was present," Dentus guessed.

Harry nodded. "And also, I hadn't had much time to think about it. Now I have. It's kind of frustrating, because I can see this would be a good thing to do. I'm just extremely concerned... when I made that comment about the thin end of the wedge..."



Dentus nodded. “Frankly, Harry, I wanted to strangle him.” Harry chuckled. “I really think he wasn’t paying full attention to what you’d said—you shifted your focus from me to him suddenly, he may have been wandering mentally. He shouldn’t, of course. For some reason he thought you were looking for a confirmation of the idea that we’d fight Voldemort as hard as possible.”

“It’s partly that,” Harry agreed, “but also... you remember four years ago, the Chamber of Secrets was opened at Hogwarts.” Dentus indicated that he was familiar with what had happened. “After several students had been Petrified, Fudge came out to Hogwarts and had Hagrid taken away to Azkaban, just on suspicion, no proof at all. His exact words to Professor Dumbledore were, ‘got to be seen to be doing something.’ I can’t help but wonder, Archibald, this is the person I’m thinking of giving more power to?”

Dentus nodded solemnly. “That sort of thing, Harry, is exactly why Albus pays such scrupulous attention to principle. I respect him for it, even when I don’t agree. Just because there are people like Fudge doesn’t mean we can’t exercise our judgment in difficult situations. Before I answer, I’d like to ask... I assume he opposes the measure?”

“I think so, but he didn’t say it to me directly. He said it was a matter of judgment and that I had to use my own, that I didn’t need his opinion and he shouldn’t try to persuade me.”

“Again, that’s Dumbledore. See, he treats you like an accomplished adult, even if some don’t. Most people in his position would use their influence to try to get you to do what they want. You respect him so much that you might very well do what he wanted you to do; he knows that, and so won’t express a preference. He’s really quite extraordinary.

“As to your question about Fudge... it’s definitely a concern. I hadn’t known that about Hagrid, but it doesn’t shock me. Granted, I’ve been around politics long enough not to be surprised by much. Most politicians are more concerned with how something looks than with how it is. I know what kind of person Fudge is... and

you may find this hard to believe, Harry, but fundamentally he means well. He wants to do the right thing. The thing about Voldemort coming back... that was probably the biggest mistake of his life, it was just too much for him to deal with. It was almost like finding an eight-year-old and saying here, lead this army into battle. The kid'll want to run and hide, and that's what Fudge did. You might ask why he was made Minister of Magic, but that's another long, long, story. The story about Hagrid, and when Voldemort came back, those are probably two of his worst misjudgments. He's not as bad as he would seem based on that."

"Well, I'll take your word for that, since I can't have seen it, and you have. So you think there is a danger from Fudge, but it's worth risking because of the benefits?"

Dentus nodded. "We just have to keep an eye on him. When you give the interview, without being too blunt, you'll want to make it clear that you're supporting the policy, not Fudge personally. You want to keep your distance somewhat. Given your experience with him, I'm sure that won't be hard. But keep in mind that supporting this gives you an influence you wouldn't otherwise have. If it goes on too long—let's imagine they wanted to continue the restriction even after Voldemort is defeated—or if they wanted to create more restrictions, you can help oppose it. Since you support this, people will take you seriously if you say it's gone on too long, or if they start doing other things that are too restrictive. By relying on your support, they are giving you a measure of influence, of power. You can use it to make sure this doesn't go too far."

"I hope you're right." Harry shook his head. "Just what I want, to get drawn more into politics."

Dentus smiled sympathetically. "Sorry, Harry. But you can learn a lot by how Albus has handled it throughout his career. He's always done what he thought was right, without regard for any desire for power or influence. Ironically, that's partly why he has both. Maybe not so much with the public, but with those like you

and I, who know him. Just stick to what you think is best, don't try to please anyone else, and you'll be all right."

"I think I can do that much. Oh, I was going to ask another thing. The Aurors were really solidly in favor of this when I talked to them on Saturday. Why didn't Fudge just go to the Aurors and get them to get me to help?"

"He did, Harry. They want this, but they refused to use their influence with you in that way," said Dentus in admiration.

Harry was also impressed. "They didn't even give me their opinion until I asked for it," he said. "Well, thank you, Archibald. I assume you'll be keeping your eyes open at the Ministry. Will you let me know if you start seeing anything disturbing?"

Dentus laughed. "I couldn't help but think, disturbing things happen there all the time, but I know what you mean. I'll certainly do that, Harry."

"Thanks, Archibald. See you later." Dentus said goodbye, and Harry withdrew from the fireplace. He sat back in his chair, lost in thought. The Apparation restriction was obviously a good idea. He had canvassed the teachers after lunch, and they were generally in favor of the idea itself, though distrustful of the Ministry. The Aurors thought it was a good idea, and so did his friends. Only Dumbledore apparently did not. As he prepared to lend his name to the idea, Harry couldn't help thinking that if Dumbledore didn't support it, it must be a mistake. Then he thought, if Snape hadn't searched the Slytherins' belongings, in violation of Dumbledore's wishes, I would be dead. This thought mitigated the disquiet he felt, but only a little.

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## HARRY POTTER ANNOUNCES SUPPORT FOR APPARATION RESTRICTION ACT

### *Voldemort Foe Says Proposed Regulation “Will Save Lives”*

*(Hogwarts) Hugo Brantell, Daily Prophet*

Hogwarts Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts Harry Potter, whose continued defiance of the evil Dark wizard Voldemort has earned him four Voldemort-ordered attempts on his life in the past six months, yesterday announced his support of the proposed Apparation Restriction Act (ARA). The ARA, proposed by the Ministry of Magic two days ago, would temporarily suspend Apparation privileges for all but specifically authorized witches and wizards. (For full details of the act, see page 1 of yesterday’s Daily Prophet.)

Asked why he supported the measure, Professor Potter said that he strongly felt that it would increase security for the wizarding community. “I’ve seen enough Dark wizards to know that Apparating is a very important weapon for them. Without the ability to Apparate freely, they’ll be able to do less than they have.”

Professor Potter also cited the support the measure has in the Auror community, a community he hopes to join after he graduates from Hogwarts. “The Aurors are out there taking risks every day so the rest of us can be safe,” he said. “If we can make their job safer in a dangerous time by enduring a little inconvenience, then it seems like the least we can do.”

The Ministry pronounced itself pleased by Professor Potter’s decision. Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge released the following statement: “We are pleased to have Professor Potter’s support for this necessary measure, and we hope that all wizards and witches will take his words to heart. We all want the most secure society possible.”

Former Ministry Undersecretary Archibald Dentus, a strong proponent of the ARA, praised Professor Potter’s statements. “Professor Potter’s support is extremely welcome. Though he has led the fight against Voldemort with a seeming lack of concern for his own personal safety, he is obviously very concerned for the safety of all witches and wizards. I have met and talked with Professor Potter, and my strongest impression was that he simply wants to do the right thing. I hope he will give guidance to future politicians by his example. He exemplifies all the qualities one would expect to find in one chosen by a phoenix.”

The following are excerpts from an interview that took place at Hogwarts yesterday morning.

Q: Professor, do you have any concerns about the measure?

A: Not about the measure itself, but about where it could lead. This gives us more security at a low cost. I wouldn't support anything that truly restricted our ability to travel. But this only restricts a particular type of travel. We have to be careful not to take away people's rights.

Q: Some people are surprised to see you supporting the Ministry. The Ministry, after all, spent most of last year conducting a campaign to discredit your claims that Voldemort had returned.

A: I'd be lying if I said that what happened last year didn't leave scars. I hope such a thing never happens again, to me or anyone. But the Ministry is supposed to represent the people, and it's the people I support. If the Ministry does something like this, which increases our security while not taking away rights, then I want to support it.

Q: That's the second time in a row you've mentioned the possibility of people's rights being taken away. That seems to be a strong concern of yours.

A: Yes, it is. In a dangerous time like this, security is very important. But history is full of examples of bad things happening when security becomes the only thing that matters. There has to be a balance, and we have to be vigilant.

Q: Your support for this measure comes shortly after the death of Percy Weasley in the most recent Death Eater attack. You are very close to the Weasley family. Is your support for this measure related to this attack, and his death?

A: This idea was explained to me, and I thought it was a good idea, before Percy's death, so it didn't influence my opinion. But it did remind me very strongly, all of us, what we're fighting against. Maybe this wouldn't have happened if this measure had been in place, I don't know. But any death is a tragedy, not only people I'm close to.

Q: Your mentor, Albus Dumbledore, has not expressed an opinion publicly on this measure. Does he support it? Did you ask for his guidance?

A: His guidance, which I always seek, was that I should make the decision that I felt was right, that I would be comfortable with. He felt that since I was the one being asked to give a public opinion, and that it was a matter of judgment, even giving me his opinion would be a form of pressure, which he wanted to avoid. And to tell you the truth, he's right; I would always be highly influenced by his opinion.

[Professor Dumbledore was unavailable for an interview by press time.]

Q: Thank you very much, Professor Potter.

## CHAPTER 20

### EASTER

The month of March passed very quickly for Harry, busy as he was with his normal classes as a teacher and a student, his Saturdays with the Aurors, Quidditch practice, and his and Neville's informal teaching of what they learned from the Aurors. It occurred to him that even if he wanted to have a girlfriend, he wouldn't have any time to pay attention to her, so it was just as well. Still, he felt the desire anyway, especially when he saw Hermione and Neville looking so happy when together.

The Apparation Restriction Act was enacted at the end of March, two days after two more attacks by Death Eaters, one on Muggles, one on wizards. Harry had wondered whether there would be any resentment directed towards him from the seventh year Hogwarts students, who'd had little chance to Apparate, and now would not be able to do something which they had long looked forward to. However, no one said anything to him or acted differently; he hoped that that would be the attitude of the population as well. Harry talked to Dentus a few more times to keep informed of what was happening, and in the most recent conversation Dentus reported that while some people grumbled and some businesses complained of higher transportation costs, most people were accepting, or at least resigned.

The Aurors were delighted, and many thanked Harry profusely the first Saturday after the ARA's enactment. "We've been really busy, of course," said Tonks. "A lot of people don't read the Prophet or even talk to other wizards much, and hadn't heard. We've gotten a lot of indignant reactions, people complaining about a police state, saying they just want to be left alone, and so forth. I want to say, 'yes,

and thank you for being such an involved and concerned citizen,' but I don't. I just give them the pamphlet we give everyone, tell them that next time there will be consequences, and let them go. People basically get warnings for a week, and after that, it gets more serious. We still have to go in teams of two, on the off chance that it is Death Eaters."

When Easter vacation finally arrived, Harry wanted to spend it at the Burrow, but he didn't because of security considerations. The Aurors were so busy warning ARA violators that it would have been too great a burden for them to also provide security for the Burrow, and Harry easily understood. He contented himself with two dinners, both after Auror training sessions, of which he and Neville had four through the week. Harry now understood how important they considered his training, to make sure it happened even when they were very busy.

On the first Monday after vacation, Harry walked with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville to breakfast. They had waited for him, and planned to stay with him even more than before, now that Malfoy was back, probably with a new supply of Dark Arts items. As they entered the Great Hall and headed towards their normal seats, the others kept their eyes wide open, looking for anything, not being at all subtle about their intent. Harry heard some murmuring and a few chuckles at the sight.

Even as they ate, one was always scanning the area ostentatiously, and the others glanced around the room far more than was normal. Harry wanted to make a comment or joke, but didn't, as he knew how it would be received. He knew they all remembered too well what had happened the first day back from the last vacation.

About halfway through breakfast, Hedrick Flatt and Helen Clark walked up to Harry at the Gryffindor table. "Professor," Helen said without preamble, "Something strange is going on outside the Slytherin area. Professor Dumbledore is outside our portrait hole, and he's saying hello to all the Slytherins as they leave for breakfast."



“He’s checking for anyone under the Imperius Curse,” said Hermione, as Harry had deduced the same thing. “Good idea, but knowing him, I’m almost surprised he’ll even do that.”

“I should hope he would,” said Neville, as Ron and Ginny agreed. “And it looks like it was a good idea, look.” They could now see Malfoy and Pansy taking their seats at the Slytherin table, but not Crabbe. “Crabbe’s stuck to Malfoy like glue since Goyle died,” Neville continued. “And Crabbe was the next candidate to be put under the Imperius Curse. They’ll have been looking for him, and they must have got him.”

“Thank goodness,” said Hermione, “if that’s true. I mean, God only knows what they were going to have him do, blow up the whole Hall just to get Harry? They know we won’t let him get anywhere near Harry.” Hedrick and Helen nodded approvingly.

“What, did you decide you were going to Stun him if he got within five yards of me?” joked Harry.

Ron answered him, deady serious. “Fifteen yards is what we decided, Harry, him or Malfoy. Hermione insisted that we had to give him a warning, but then if he doesn’t stop, he goes down. I don’t care if it looks like he’s just going to the bathroom.”

Harry was startled. “You can’t do that! You’re prefects, and—“

Ron rolled his eyes. “Harry’s being stupid again,” he said, as Hermione added, “Come on, Harry, do you think we care about that right now? Think a little.” She turned and said to the Slytherins, “He’s really pretty clever, most of the time.” They chuckled.

Neville suddenly stood. “Ron, Hermione.” He pointed at Malfoy, heading towards their table, still a good distance away. They stood immediately and headed in Malfoy’s direction, obviously to cut him off before he got anywhere near Harry. Ron looked over his shoulder, saying, “Ginny, sit on him.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I assume he just meant that you were supposed to make sure I didn't move until they got back?"

She fixed him with a serious look. "Try to move, and you'll find out."

Harry decided not to try, and just watch to see what happened. Hermione, Ron, and Neville, wands out, met Malfoy at the midpoint of the aisle, between the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables. Malfoy, to Harry's surprise, did not have his wand out, but he did have his usual smugness.

"Out of my way, you three. I was just going to say hello to Professor Potter, ask him if he had a good vacation," he sneered. "Don't worry, no harm will come to your leader's scar. I can't imagine he's scared to talk to me." He rolled up his sleeves halfway and held up his hands. "Look, see, no guns."

The Hall was silent; nobody seemed to think Malfoy's comment was funny. "Go back to your table and sit down, Malfoy," said Ron. "This is your only warning. If you don't think we're serious, try us."

"Is this on your authority as a prefect?" asked Malfoy, amused.

"No," said Neville, calmly, to Harry's surprise. "It's on his authority as one of the three people who's going to send you flying across the Hall if you don't go back and sit down." This was greeted by some cheers and applause from all tables.

"You can't stop me from going anywhere in this Hall I want," said Malfoy with certainty. "Your fearless leader can leave the Hall if he's afraid of me," he added, more loudly.

Harry knew that Malfoy wanted to provoke him into going over there. Ginny tensed a bit next to him. "Don't worry, Ginny, I'm not going for it," he assured her.

"He's not afraid of Voldemort, Malfoy, why should he be afraid of you?" Neville said, in as close to a sneer as Harry had ever heard from him.

As Neville spoke, Harry saw a few people get up. Justin, Ernie, Hannah, Anthony Goldstein, Cho, and Luna were all up, with wands out, and heading over

to where Harry's friends had intercepted Malfoy. They took up position behind Ron, Neville, and Hermione.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "I don't care how many of you there are, I can walk where I want. Does he really need the whole school to protect him from me?"

This was greeted by a mass of chairs shuffling, and people getting up. About half of the students in the Hall, including many Slytherins, had stood and were starting to head to where the others were standing. Harry was touched, and exchanged a smile with Ginny.

Professor McGonagall got up from the teachers' table—Harry wondered why she had waited this long—and briskly walked over to the rapidly increasing crowd around Malfoy. "Everyone, please take your seats," she said loudly. "Mr. Malfoy, please return to your table," she said to him.

Malfoy looked outraged. "I can get up and walk anywhere I want to! You have no right to tell me—"

"Here is what I am telling you, Mr. Malfoy," she said, in her sternest 'I mean business' tone. "If you say one more word, or are not sitting in your seat at the table in one minute, you will be expelled. You have been warned."

The Hall was quiet as everyone watched Malfoy. He glared at McGonagall for ten seconds, then turned without a word and headed back to his seat. Hermione, Ron, and Neville thanked the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs backing them up, and returned to the table.

"Thanks, everyone," said Harry, as his friends resumed their seats.

"Well, he definitely wasn't under the Imperius Curse," said Hermione. "I'm sure he just wanted to come over and insult you a bit."

"Yes, but the problem is, he probably thinks of it as his last chance while Harry's still alive," pointed out Neville. Ron nodded his agreement.

"I seem pretty safe, if what we just saw was any indication," said Harry. The others looked at him skeptically.

“I wish it was, Harry, but you and we know it’s not,” said Hermione. “He’ll have things that will be very hard to defend against. He probably won’t even be near you when whatever he does happens. We’ll just have to react quickly and hope for the best.”

Ron grinned. “I liked what you said there, Neville.”

“Yeah, it was pretty good,” agreed Ginny. “It’s amazing, Neville, how you can be tough and cute at the same time.” The others laughed, especially Hermione, as Neville turned a light shade of red and smiled at Ginny. Harry returned to his breakfast.

The morning owls came pouring through the open windows of the Great Hall, and started dropping their mail. Just then, a loud explosion was heard, and the Hall shook, as if there had been a small earthquake. The frightened owls screeched and flew erratically, a few dropping their packages and letters in the wrong places. McGonagall flew out of her seat, running toward the sound of the explosion. Harry and his friends exchanged looks, silently speculating.

“I think,” Ron finally said, “that we have just heard the last of Mr. Victor Crabbe.”

“I’m just praying he didn’t take anyone with him,” said Ginny.

“Good point, Dumbledore would have been the one with him,” added Neville.

Ron shook his head. “No bomb is going to kill Albus Dumbledore.”

“I really, really hope you’re right,” said Harry. They looked around, but could not see any evidence of what had happened. A minute later, Dumbledore strode into the Great Hall, and stepped up to the lectern at the teachers’ table.

“Your attention, please. The explosion you just heard and felt was, as you have no doubt guessed, the latest attempt on Professor Harry Potter’s life by Voldemort. Mr. Victor Crabbe, under the Imperius Curse, smuggled a small but powerful explosive into Hogwarts. His goal was to get as close as possible to Professor Potter and set off the explosive. As I discovered too late, the bomb had a

device which would set it off when exposed to magic. Professor Snape, who was assisting me, was able to put up a shield at the last second protecting us from physical damage, saving my life. Obviously, Mr. Crabbe was killed in the explosion.”

“Two down, one to go,” Ron muttered. Hermione glared at him, her look saying, ‘I’m not sorry he’s dead either, but don’t say things like that.’

“That is all, thank you for your attention,” concluded Dumbledore, who walked away.

Hermione was surprised. “They’re not canceling classes? They did after Goyle died.”

“I think that was because we all saw it with our own eyes,” speculated Neville. “This one we just heard, maybe that’s the difference.”

“But... I mean, think about what would have happened if they hadn’t gotten to him,” said Hermione. “You felt that... it would have killed a lot of the people in this room.”

“What are you thinking, Harry?” asked Ginny. Harry had been listening, with many thoughts competing for attention in his mind.

He shook his head. “I’m not sure... just thinking about what Hermione said. Thank goodness they didn’t think of giving Goyle the bomb.”

“Look at Pansy and Malfoy,” Neville whispered. Harry looked across the Hall, and saw Pansy touching the face of a shaken-looking Malfoy, who was trying not to look shaken. They saw her take his hand and talk to him.

Hermione shook her head. “I respect her so much,” she whispered.

“Me, too,” said Ginny. “I don’t know how she does it. I couldn’t.” She looked at Harry, who nodded somberly and said, “I hope to God nothing happens to her.”

“Look at him,” said Ron disdainfully. “He’s all upset because he knows that bomb could have taken him with it. Doesn’t he know that he’s just another slab of meat to Voldemort, that he doesn’t matter? Didn’t he know what he was signing up for?”

“Probably his father neglected to mention that to him,” agreed Harry.

“Looks like he knows it now,” said Ron. “He’s in it way too deep to back out now, though.”

They finished their now-cold breakfast, and headed off to their classes. Harry’s first years expressed their vast relief that he had survived, their lack of sadness over Crabbe’s death, and their amazement that Dumbledore still allowed Malfoy in the school. Harry decided not to try to explain matters of principle to them, especially since Dumbledore took it to greater lengths than he would, and simply expressed faith that whatever Dumbledore decided would work out.

After morning classes and lunch, Harry went to the staff room, but Hermione and Neville insisted on accompanying him, and that he stay there until before two o’clock, when they could come get him. He nodded and entered the room, and sat down on the sofa next to John. The room was unusually quiet, and Harry wondered if it was because of him. Deciding to be irreverent, he said, “So, what’s new?”

A few teachers looked at him strangely, and John chuckled. “The condemned man cheerfully declined the blindfold and cigarette,” he said.

“Is that a quote from Muggle literature, John?” asked Sprout. “Or just your sense of humor?”

“It’s my comment on Harry’s sense of humor,” John explained. “You’d think there wasn’t another attempt on his life coming at him, clear as day. That doesn’t bother you, Harry?”

Harry thought about it. “It probably would if it hadn’t happened so many times already. I don’t know if you can say I’m used to it, but I do know that it’s going to keep happening as long as Voldemort and I are both still alive. It’s almost like the status quo, though I know there’s one coming up fairly soon. But it might be awhile, too—maybe they want to wait until I’m not so on my guard. So it doesn’t have to be in the next day or two.”

“Just an ordinary day of danger, if you’re Harry Potter,” said Flitwick. “And it doesn’t bother you that this could all go away if Professor Dumbledore just expelled Malfoy?”

Harry raised his eyebrows and looked around the room; it was very rare to hear even an implied criticism of Dumbledore. Noting his look, Sprout said, “Harry, we all love him, you know that. But that doesn’t mean we always agree with him. He’s taking a huge risk for the sake of principle.”

“And what is the point of having principles,” asked McGonagall, “if you abandon them in difficult circumstances?”

Sprout sighed. “We’ve been through all this, Minerva. I was just explaining to Harry that we don’t all agree on this. I’m sure we’d like to know what you think, Harry.”

Harry thought about how he should answer, then decided that the truth was best. “Neville asked me, would I expel someone if Hermione was in my position, and I said yes, I would. But that doesn’t mean I think that Professor Dumbledore is wrong. I respect his devotion to principle.” He went on to say the same thing to them that he had to Dentus about what happened to Hagrid in the second year. “That’s what can happen when you decide to take action against people just based on speculation. Now, I know this is a very different situation, but the idea is similar. So if I have to be put at risk so that kind of thing doesn’t happen, then I will.”

“And your friends, who are in the line of fire as well?” asked Flitwick quietly. “Whatever Malfoy does could miss you and hit them.”

Harry nodded. “That bothers me more than anything else. But I just have to trust him. There’s nothing else I can do.”

Nobody said anything for a moment, then Sprout sat down next to him on the sofa. “That’s very admirable, Harry,” she said. “Let’s hope it goes well. We want you back next year.” Harry nodded his thanks and said nothing.

Harry relaxed and talked with the teachers about other topics until a quarter to two, at which time Snape got up to leave. Harry had occasionally walked to

Potions with Snape, if only because Snape's leaving reminded him that it was time to go. "Will you be coming to Potions, Professor?" asked Snape, as Harry failed to move from the sofa.

Harry shook his head. "I promised Hermione and Neville I'd stay here until they came to pick me up."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I believe I can guarantee your safety during the long and treacherous journey from here to the Potions dungeon."

Harry chuckled, as did a few other teachers. "I'm sure you can, but that isn't the point. It'll make them feel better to take me, so I'll wait for them."

"As you wish, Professor," said Snape, turning to leave. "But I shall not look kindly upon your lateness, so be prompt, even if they are not."

As the door closed, Harry said to Sprout, "I wanted to ask him just what he would look kindly on."

She chuckled, as did Flitwick. "Better that you didn't, Harry," he said. "You don't want to tweak him too much. Once a year is enough."

Hermione and Neville showed up at eight minutes to two, and Harry and Hermione walked into the Potions dungeon with a minute to spare. After Potions, it was their custom to meet in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom with Ron, Neville, and Ginny, and he and Neville would teach the others some of what they had learned the previous Saturday. As they walked there, Hermione humorously asked, "So, did you thank Snape for saving Dumbledore's life?"

"I would have if I thought it would mean anything to him," Harry replied. "But you know him, he'd just react like I had said something totally irrelevant." He then told her about the conversation in the staff room.

"Well, I'm not surprised they'd feel like that," she said, looking around from time to time, on her guard. "Dumbledore's position on this is a bit extreme, though I grant you, the Hagrid story is very appropriate. That is exactly what can happen. Still, to allow someone you love to be put in that kind of jeopardy..."



They had reached the hallway leading to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom; Harry could see Neville standing outside the door, on guard. He waved, and they walked toward him.

Harry suddenly felt a buzzing in his robes. He stopped walking, took out the Galleon, and showed it to Hermione; it was the emergency signal from Pansy. “Neville!” she shouted. “Get the others, and get over here!” Harry saw Neville shout into the classroom, and then run over to him and Hermione, with Ron and Ginny following a few seconds behind. All had their wands drawn, surrounding Harry. Neville walked up to the next corner and looked around it, but saw nothing. Hermione took out her map.

“Where is she... ah, she’s with Malfoy, they’re...” she went silent for a moment, then continued, “Ah, they’re moving. Nowhere near us. Okay, Harry, you know the drill.”

Before vacation had ended, they had all agreed on what would be done in this kind of situation. Pansy’s sending of the emergency signal was to be interpreted as a sign that Harry’s life was in imminent danger. He was not to move, and was to go immediately to Dumbledore’s office by using Fawkes. Fawkes appeared, presenting his tail feathers for Harry to grab. “Be very careful,” he urged the others.

Hermione nodded impatiently. “We will, Harry. Now, go!”

Harry grabbed Fawkes’s tail, but said nothing; he had discovered that by now, he did not need to tell Fawkes where to go, as Fawkes always knew. They appeared in Dumbledore’s office; Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape were talking. “She sent the signal,” he said. “The others are near the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.” He took out his Hogwarts map and opened it up, looking for the purple spot. “Okay, there they are, heading to the Slytherin area. Now, does she just know, or has he had a chance to do anything... show me Malfoy, the last four hours, sixty times normal speed, ten times normal speed when moving.”

As they watched, McGonagall let out a low whistle. “I assume Hermione did this?”

Involved in watching the map, Harry nodded. “Ron and Ginny have been keeping an eye on this all day, and it’ll go off if he goes anyplace unusual, but apparently he didn’t... no, the closest place he comes to me is the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, but he didn’t stop... still, look at his path, he just seems to have walked around it for no good reason. That has to be it.”

“Minerva, please meet Harry’s friends where they are now, and escort them to your office, pending further instructions.” As she left, Dumbledore addressed Snape. “Severus, please fetch Mr. Malfoy and escort him here.” Snape swept out of the office. “Harry, when Mr. Malfoy is almost here, please ask Fawkes to take you to my living quarters, and stay there until I ask him to bring you back here.” Agreeing, Harry sat down to wait, keeping an eye on the map. He saw McGonagall approach his friends, and saw them all walk away from the classroom. He saw Snape with Malfoy and Pansy in the Slytherin common room, and then saw Snape and Malfoy walking towards Dumbledore’s office. As they approached the gargoyles, Harry prepared to ask Fawkes to take him away.

Suddenly, Malfoy’s dot disappeared from the map; it was only Snape near the gargoyles. “Professor!” Harry nearly shouted, pointing to the map. “Malfoy’s dot just disappeared.” Speaking to the map, he said, “Show Malfoy.” The map was blank.

Snape walked in, and seeing the blank map, knew that Harry and Dumbledore knew what had happened. “Of course, he did not Disapparate,” said Snape. “He simply vanished, without a sound. He was a step behind me, so I did not see it, but I know he did not run or escape by other means.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Please fetch Miss Parkinson, and on your way there, stop by Minerva’s office and have her bring Harry’s friends here, please.” Snape nodded and left.

“How did he do that, sir?” Harry asked Dumbledore.

“There are Dark Arts items which allow the user to perform a few acts of teleportation before being used up,” Dumbledore explained.

Harry continued looking at the map. His friends were on the way, and Snape was entering the Slytherin common room. After a minute, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville entered the office, followed by McGonagall. Harry started explaining what had happened with Malfoy. Another minute later, Snape and Pansy entered.

“Pansy, why did you send the signal?” asked Dumbledore.

“I got Malfoy to tell me what he was doing,” said Pansy, as Hermione seemed to twitch involuntarily. “He put up some item on the door that’s the entrance to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. It’s been made invisible. Apparently it puts out this field of deadly energy that grows with time. He said it can be set to affect only one person, and of course that person is Harry. No one would have noticed a thing until Harry walked near enough to the door, and then he would have been killed instantly.”

“We were about to pass by that door, less than a minute away,” said Hermione, looking appalled.

“Thank goodness,” said Pansy fervently. “I sent the signal the instant he told me, I’m so glad it was in time. Is he still in danger?” she asked, now addressing Dumbledore.

“We have no information about that, so we must assume he is,” replied Dumbledore. “The device Malfoy used to escape has a limited range, I believe, so he may still be in the area; for example, he could be hiding in the Forbidden Forest. Even if he is outside Hogwarts, as this map would seem to suggest, he cannot Apparate away, as that would alert the Aurors. He could take a Portkey, of course, but we should assume he is still a threat.”

“We have to have around-the-clock security on Harry,” said Ron. “He could use that thing to pop into our dormitory at three in the morning and off him.”

“Do not worry, Ron, it will be attended to,” said Dumbledore reassuringly. “I believe I know a few people who will volunteer for the job. Severus, will you please go find and deactivate the device?” Snape nodded and was gone.

“Sir,” asked Harry, “Will Malfoy know that Pansy told us? Is there any other way he knows of that we could have found out?”

Pansy looked surprised. “What does it matter, Harry? He’s gone, and if he comes back, it’ll be to finish you off.”

“Harry is still concerned for your safety,” explained Dumbledore to Pansy, who gave him an annoyed but affectionate look. To Harry, Dumbledore said, “He can speculate, and the timing of events would seem to suggest it, but he cannot know. In addition, she had no opportunity to talk to anyone from the time he told her to the time Professor Snape took him to my office. It is most likely that he will assume he was found out some other way. For the time being, to be prudent, we will not yet reveal Pansy’s role to anyone else at Hogwarts. But Pansy is correct, Harry, it is your safety we must focus on.

“The device he is using to teleport not only has a limited number of uses—three, I believe—but a limited life as well. It can only be used for twenty-four hours after it is first used, so after that time, the threat to Harry will have decreased greatly. For now, Harry must not remain unattended, even for so short a time as a trip to the restroom.”

Ron grinned. “Well, Neville, looks like taking Harry to the loo is our job, then.” Harry rolled his eyes. More seriously, Ron asked, “We have a Quidditch practice tonight. Should we cancel it?”

“Given the nature of Malfoy’s teleportation device, I would say Harry is at least as safe on the pitch as anyplace else, perhaps more so. If Hermione and Neville fly their usual patrols, I see no problem. Pansy, you did not get the sense that there are any other traps he has laid for Harry?”

She shook her head. “No, he seemed pretty sure that this one would do it. I think he would have told me if there were others.”

“Very well. You should feel free to resume your normal activities, though of course you should go nowhere near the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom

until Professor Snape confirms that he has removed the device. And Pansy... thank you.”

Harry’s friends echoed the sentiment, and Hermione threw her arms around Pansy, hugging her fiercely. Pansy was a little startled, but smiled. “All of you... I know you’ll watch him carefully. I wish I could do it with you, but I guess Professor Dumbledore’s right, I should keep my head down a little while longer. But I can’t tell you how glad I am that I’m done dealing with him.”

“Boy, can I understand that,” agreed Harry. He looked at her, wanting to express how grateful he was, but he couldn’t think of any words strong enough to say what he wanted.

She smiled. “Harry, remember what I said a long time ago, that your eyes are very expressive? Well, they are now, too. It’s okay, you don’t have to think of any words. Your eyes already said it.”

He nodded. “They probably said it better than my words could have anyway.”

Pansy left Dumbledore’s office first; Harry and the others followed a minute later. They walked back to the Gryffindor common room, and had the teaching session they had planned to have in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom.

The story of what had happened, except for Pansy’s involvement, was starting to spread around the school by dinnertime. Several students had seen Snape dismantling the device Malfoy had put up, and asked about it. Harry and his friends could see no reason not to tell them. People expressed relief that Harry was all right, and happiness that Malfoy would no longer be at Hogwarts. Hermione emphasized, though, that Malfoy could yet return, so they still had to be vigilant. When Harry expressed surprise that she would go out of her way to mention that to people, she replied, “I don’t want people to let their guard down, I want them to still be looking out for you. You’re still in a good deal of danger.” Harry didn’t argue, but still felt that Pansy was in more danger than he was.

After dinner, they all headed out to the Quidditch pitch, along with the rest of the Gryffindor team. Harry practiced his search patterns and looking for the Snitch as the rest of the team practiced their usual maneuvers. They were mostly practicing standard moves, because Ginny was so fast on the Firebolt that they had to re-learn them taking into account the Firebolt's speed. A few minutes into the practice, Harry noticed that there were more brooms in the air than there should have been. Looking more closely, he saw that four more people—Justin, Ernie, Cho, and Terry—were on brooms, circling the pitch with Neville and Hermione. Harry got the feeling that most of the first years would be there, too, if they were allowed their own brooms.

After the practice, they all set down, and Harry profusely thanked the four for their gesture of support. Terry smiled and said, "Really, it was just a chance to spy on your practice. Ginny, you're really good on that thing. Somehow I have a feeling that Dennis won't be scoring all the goals this time for you guys."

"Thanks, Terry," she said. "But I think it would be hard not to be good on that broom."

"I'm sure Malfoy could manage it," said Ron.

"So, he could still come back?" asked Ernie. "With that thing he used to escape?"

"Yes," Ron answered. "Dumbledore thinks that in forty-eight hours, Harry'll be safe. Well, as safe as he ever is. At least now, Malfoy'll be gone, along with the people who supported him."

"What about that Pansy Parkinson?" asked Cho with distaste. "She's always supported him, being really nasty to people, and she's still here. Isn't she a danger?"

Harry fought to keep his face expressionless. Hermione said, trying to sound dismissive, "She's not the type to risk her own neck, Cho. With Crabbe and Goyle, their fathers were Death Eaters, so they didn't mind sacrificing their sons to Voldemort. Her father isn't, so they won't use her for that. And now that Malfoy's

gone, she'll keep her head down. But don't worry, we'll keep our eyes open." Harry could imagine how hard it was for Hermione to say that.

"Well, we will too," said Cho. "I hope you're right, but— what, Harry?"

Harry had stopped walking. "The signal," he said. Pulling out the Galleon, he added, "It's her." Ginny, Neville, and Hermione immediately got out their wands, and Ron got out his map. Harry shouted, "No! This isn't an emergency signal, it's a distress signal! She wouldn't know anything new unless Malfoy was back, and if he is, she's in trouble. Fawkes!"

Fawkes instantly appeared, presenting his tail feathers. The four non-Gryffindors gaped at the unexpected turn of events. "She's in her dormitory, alone," said Ron. "Show Malfoy, fifteen minutes, one hundred twenty times normal speed." The map was blank for four seconds, then showed Malfoy in the Slytherin sixth year girls' dormitory for three, after which he disappeared from the map again.

"Harry, don't!" Hermione almost screamed, pleading. "It could be a trap! He could've made her tell him about the Galleon, sent the signal! Please—"

But Harry had already decided to go. He grabbed Fawkes' tail feathers, felt Fawkes start to lift off. Hermione suddenly jumped onto him, arms around his neck, and the next thing he knew, they were in the Slytherin sixth year girls' dormitory.

Harry looked down, and was chilled to the bone by what he saw. Pansy was on the floor, barely conscious, and there was blood everywhere. Her robes and shirt had been torn open, and her stomach was covered with blood.

"Pansy!" Hermione shrieked, and bent down to look at her. "Oh, my God..."

Harry noticed out of the corner of his eye what looked like an open door in the middle of the room, leading into blackness. He wanted to investigate it, but he knew what he had to do first. Grabbing Fawkes' tail, he was suddenly in the infirmary. "Madam Pomfrey!" he shouted.

She walked towards him. "What—"

"Someone's been stabbed!" he shouted. She grabbed a bag as he said, "Hold on to me!" She put her arms around his chest and shoulders and held tight. Putting one arm around her shoulders, he grabbed hold of Fawkes again, and they were back in the dormitory.

Madam Pomfrey swore and bent over, opening her bag. Hermione was touching Pansy's face, saying "It'll be okay, Pansy, don't worry." Madam Pomfrey waved her wand at Pansy's stomach, and the blood disappeared, making the wound clear. Though it continued bleeding, it was easy to see exactly how Malfoy had cut her. The cut was about nine inches long, and was shaped exactly like the scar on Harry's forehead. Harry winced and shook his head in disbelief. Hermione gasped, looked at Harry sadly, then continued talking to the nearly-unconscious Pansy reassuringly. Pansy mumbled something to Hermione that Harry couldn't hear.

Fawkes fluttered down and landed on Pansy's chest. He leaned over, and a tear fell onto the wound, followed by two more. Even though Fawkes had once saved Harry's life that way, Harry had forgotten that phoenixes did that. He silently thanked Fawkes, then looked at the doorway, which could not have been more obviously meant for him. He almost stepped through it automatically, but forced himself to stop and think. Seeming to know what he was thinking, Hermione said urgently, "Don't go, Harry, there's no reason to—"

They were interrupted by a horrible scream coming from the doorway. Harry was sure that it was from the Cruciatus Curse being used. It was female, but he wasn't sure—

"Ginny," said Hermione, looking terrified. "But how could that be Ginny? She was just with us—"

"I'm not going to sit around and debate it," Harry said firmly. He knew he was going through.

"But, Harry," started Hermione, but one look at his face told her it would be useless. "Focus on love, Harry," she urged him. "Come from the same place you did with Voldemort."



Harry nodded, tried to calm his thoughts as Ginny continued screaming, and stepped through the doorway.

The door seemed to close behind him, and it took his eyes a moment to adjust to the sudden darkness. It was not pitch black, but there was very little light. Ginny continued screaming, much more loudly now that he was in the room. Wand already out, without thinking, Harry summoned up the shield that he had created to protect against the Cruciatus Curse, and pointed his wand at Ginny, lying on the ground fifteen feet in front of him. He saw the silvery shield snap on. Ginny stopped screaming, her body slack. He started to run up to her, but found he couldn't move. Fawkes appeared in the air above him, singing.

“Avada Kedavra!” shouted Malfoy, who Harry still could not see, and the green bolt came at him. As he had at Hogsmeade, Fawkes swooped down and swallowed the curse, bursting into flames. Again, he was now a chick walking around the ground.

Slowly, Harry started to be able to make out his surroundings. Near Ginny was what looked like a glass or plastic wall, six feet high and six feet wide. He could now see Malfoy behind it. He knew that it would repel any magic, and that Malfoy was using it as a shield.

Malfoy looked even more smug than usual, if that was possible. “Knew you couldn't resist coming, Potter, being all heroic as you are. You should thank me, now you know that your spell works on other people, too. Too bad you'll never have a chance to tell anyone about it.”

Harry tried again to move, but could not. He remembered Hermione's advice, and focused on love. He could feel it all around him. Don't be baited, he thought. He didn't try to attack Malfoy through the shield, knowing it would be useless, and could even bounce back onto him. Harry looked around, and could now see enough to know that they were in the Chamber of Secrets, and that Ginny was lying very close to where she had four years ago.

Malfoy saw Harry's look of recognition. "Yes, I thought this was a good place for this. The Dark Lord almost finished you off here four years ago, but couldn't quite manage it. And now, I get to finish the job. Oh, I've been looking forward to this."

Harry had no desire to listen to Malfoy gloat, but also had no inclination to say anything. He didn't want to give Malfoy the satisfaction. He focused on love, and on a way out of the situation. He tried to move his feet, and again, he couldn't.

"No, you're staying put," said Malfoy, noticing Harry's movements. "I had to use up half the stuff Father had saved, but this is worth it. That will keep you in place, this," gesturing to the wall, "will keep me safe, and this, which you can't see back here, this brought her here."

Harry still said nothing, but couldn't keep confusion off his face. "Yes, you might never have heard of it, being upstanding and all, and this is a classic Dark Arts item. It takes the person who is most loved by the target person within a mile or so and transports them away. Really amazing, actually." Malfoy looked genuinely pleased. "I was a bit surprised it was her, but I guess since Granger got taken by Longbottom—now there's a couple, they really deserve each other—you had to set your sights even lower. Could be worse, I thought there was a chance it would take her brother," Malfoy snickered. "You love him so much, you got him a Firebolt."

Harry felt there was a lot he could say, but again said nothing. He continued to focus on love. He wondered what he could do. He couldn't move, his wand was useless except to protect Ginny, Fawkes had already taken a Killing Curse, and Malfoy could kill him any time he wanted.

Malfoy seemed to be reading his mind. "Not much you can do, is there? I only sent the first Killing Curse to get rid of the phoenix, can't have him running off and bringing Dumbledore here. No, this is just you and me. This is my reward for putting up with you for six years. Harry Potter, the golden boy." He paused. "You really have nothing to say?"

Harry could see he was getting to him. He raised his eyebrows slightly and shook his head, still silent. Malfoy rolled his eyes. “I Silenced her, Potter, not you. I know you’re just trying to annoy me. I’m surprised that you’d bother, given that you’re going to die very soon, and the longer you keep me entertained, the longer you stay alive. Well, I’ll let her speak now, see what she has to say.” He pointed his wand at her. She still couldn’t move, but Harry could see her eyes. She stared up at Malfoy, her expression stony.

“Following his example, I see,” Malfoy said, more annoyed. “Tell you what, Weasley... your boyfriend here’s going to die in a few minutes. If you talk to me, I might let him live.”

Harry knew, of course, that that was a lie. Ginny apparently did as well, as she continued her silence.

“All right, then,” sighed Malfoy, “here we go... no final words, even? I promise to relay them to the Prophet.”

Harry could only think of one thing to try. He had no idea whether it would work, but there was nothing else. He concentrated, and visualized a shield, similar to the one that stopped the Cruciatus Curse, again composed of the energy of love. He saw it in his mind, and noticed that its color was green. I wonder why it’s green, he thought. But as he saw it, he suddenly knew that it would work. He wasn’t even sure how he knew, but he knew. He focused more deeply on love; he was ready.

“So long, Potter... Avada Kedavra!” Malfoy stuck his arm from behind his shield and fired off a green bolt. A vivid green shield snapped on around Harry, and the Killing Curse hit it, fizzled, and died.

Malfoy gaped, unable to believe what he had just seen. Ginny said nothing, but smiled at Harry, delirious with joy and relief. Harry smiled back, then had a flash of understanding about what he had just done. He realized that this shield and the Cruciatus shield were not just isolated spells he had found, but were related, and that there could be a whole class of spells that could only be done by using the

energy of love. He didn't linger on the thought, however, as there was still Malfoy to deal with.

Malfoy tried again, and again, the Killing Curse was absorbed by Harry's shield. Seeming to know it would not work, but needing to try anyway, Malfoy pointed his wand at Ginny and said the words. Even as he said them, the green shield snapped on around Ginny, and the bolt dissipated.

Malfoy looked furious and disbelieving, much as Voldemort had in the fifth dream, when Harry had used the other new spell for the first time. "You're still going to die, Potter, just more slowly and painfully. We're in the Chamber of Secrets, and it's been sealed off. No one knows where you are. You can't Disapparate out, and your phoenix can't get you out. I have a way out, of course, but you two will starve and die. I'd rather have watched it myself, but I guess we can't have everything."

He opened what seemed to be a trap door in the floor, and stepped into it. With only his head showing, he grabbed a few things. The shield disappeared, and Harry could now move. Harry aimed his wand, but Malfoy had already ducked below the ground. He pulled the trap door shut, and the ground was just stone; there was no evidence that anything had ever been there.

Ginny could now move as well, but she couldn't stand up. Harry ran to her, sat next to her, and held her. "Harry... I don't believe it..."

"Yeah, it was kind of a surprise to me, too. Well... no Fawkes, no Diffusion, I guess I had to come up with something myself."

She pulled back to see his face, and shook her head. "Something that no other wizard in history has been able to do... I'm overwhelmed, Harry, I don't know what to say. I feel like... even if he's right and we do starve and die here, at least I got to be with you at the end." She looked at him with powerful emotion, a look that he had seen before...

It all came to him in an instant; he had seen that look as she held him right after the fourth dream, and he hadn't been able to identify it. He could now. She

was in love with him. And in that instant he knew he was in love with her as well. He had been for, he wasn't sure how long, but he realized he hadn't even admitted it to himself. He was still very afraid, and what had just happened intensified that fear; Ginny had almost been killed precisely because she was the person he loved most. I can't expose her to this risk, he thought, I just can't. I couldn't bear to lose her, or to have her lose me. After this is over...

All this took less than a second to go through his mind as he looked at her, then he pulled her to him again, holding her. After a few seconds, he said, "That's not going to happen. He has to be wrong."

"What do you think we can do?" she asked.

"Well, of course we can search it, see if we find anything interesting, but it's not likely. I think the thing to do is try to Disapparate."

"But Harry, I can't Disapparate. And you heard him, you know that you can't Apparate or Disapparate into or out of Hogwarts."

"I might be able to take you with me, if I can," Harry said. "The Aurors do it, they did it with you once. But even if I can't take you with me, I could go get help. If I can get out, someone can get in. And I know about the thing about Hogwarts, but this is so far underground, maybe it's not considered part of Hogwarts, maybe you just can't Apparate or Disapparate from the surface. It'd be stupid not to try."

"Okay," she said, struggling to her feet. "Wow, I can barely get up. The Cruciatus Curse, it's so horrible... thank goodness I have a friend who knows how to stop it." She smiled and looked at him proudly.

"I was very glad I could," he said. "Now, how do we do this... okay, I think the best thing is for me to carry you. The only problem is that if I go and you don't, you'll fall. I just don't know if I can do it like they can, with the hands on the shoulders."

"Right now, Harry, it wouldn't surprise me if you were able to get the moon turning around the Earth the other way. But you should do it however you want.

Sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you," she said, as she saw red creep into Harry's cheeks. "I'm just a bit awestruck for some reason."

"I'll deal with it," he said. He bent over and picked up the baby Fawkes, and put him carefully into a pocket in his robes. "Okay, let me pick you up..." Still holding his wand, he bent down, his left arm around her back, and picked her up. He grunted with the effort.

"Am I too heavy for you?" she asked humorously. Ginny's build was normal, so Harry knew she was teasing him.

"No, just never picked up another person before. Okay, I need to concentrate for a minute..." Again he calmed his mind, focusing on love. Now, though, when he focused on love, he saw her face. He looked at her, he saw how she looked at him. He was still frightened, but what was in her eyes made him feel better than he could recall ever feeling. He summoned a mental image of the Hogwarts gates, the closest place to Hogwarts that he could Apparate. He willed himself and Ginny there...

...and it was dark outside the Hogwarts gates; Harry could only see a little light from the castle and from Hogsmeade. He gently put Ginny down, but was still supporting her, as she was shaken from her ordeal. As he did so, he heard two pops, and Cassandra and Tonks suddenly Apparated a few feet away.

"Harry! Ginny! How... where did you Disapparate from?" asked Cassandra, bewildered.

"We were in the Chamber of Secrets, it's a long story," he said, as their eyebrows went high. "I have to get her inside, she's been through a lot."

Cassandra and Tonks exchanged a glance. "Harry," Tonks asked, "that walk we took in December, what were we doing, and what did I say was most important?"

Harry looked puzzled at the non sequitur, but then realized why she was asking. "You were holding my hand, and you said, 'the girl is always right.'"

Tonks nodded. "Sorry, Harry, you can't be too careful. Let's go." They opened the Hogwarts gates. Tonks helped support Ginny as they made their way up to the castle entrance.

They were greeted by a group of Gryffindor and Slytherin first years. "Professor! You're okay!" A few went running off. "Yes, I'm okay," he said. "But we need to get her to the infirmary."

"I'll be all right, Harry," said Ginny. "I just need to relax a little. I didn't get to be held for as long as I should have been."

"I'm sure someone will help you out," he assured her.

They entered the infirmary a few minutes later. Harry saw Dumbledore, Snape, McGonagall, and Madam Pomfrey standing at one end of the room. Ron, Neville, and Hermione were sitting near Pansy's bed. "Ginny!" Ron shouted, leaping up out of his chair. He ran to her and hugged her. "We were really worried." To Harry, he said, "After you and Hermione left, we three started running back to the castle, and halfway there, Ginny just disappeared. We were scared, because we knew it must have something to do with Malfoy." Hermione and Neville hugged Ginny as Ron talked.

"Let's get you to a bed," said Madam Pomfrey, taking Ginny and steering her to the beds. Ginny saw Pansy, and gasped. "What happened?" she asked.

"She wasn't able to say very much," said Hermione, "she lost a fair amount of blood. Malfoy cut her stomach, and used the Curse on her, is what we know for sure. Fortunately, the cut wasn't that deep, so while it looked bad, there was only minor damage to her internal organs. Madam Pomfrey says she'll be okay in a couple of days. He did the Curse on you, didn't he, Ginny? There was a passage from Pansy's dormitory, we could hear you screaming..."

Ginny sat, nodding. "I'd like to borrow Neville for a few minutes, if you wouldn't mind." Neville sat next to her and held her.

Professor Dumbledore approached, the other two teachers behind him. “Harry, I am very glad that you and Ginny are all right. I would very much like to know what happened.”

“It’s probably just easier if I let you see it,” Harry said. “You’ll want to anyway. Tonks and Cassandra should too.”

Dumbledore nodded and left to get the Pensieve. Harry approached Pansy’s bed, but was stopped by Madam Pomfrey. “Professor, I’ve been very indulgent in allowing so many people to tromp through the infirmary, but she needs sleep. You must not touch her, or speak too loudly.”

Harry nodded, and kept his distance from Pansy’s bed, much as he wanted to sit next to it and wait for her to get better. A minute later, Dumbledore returned with the Pensieve, and Harry put his memories into it. “Harry, Ginny,” said Hermione. “Do you mind if—“

”No, it’s fine,” said Harry, as Ginny nodded. “Neville, I’ll hold her, I don’t need to see it again.” Neville patted Ginny one more time and got up, Harry taking his place. The three professors, two Aurors, and three friends of Harry’s put their fingers into the Pensieve. Harry and Ginny were alone, except for Madam Pomfrey, who was across the infirmary from them.

As Harry held her, Ginny said, “They’re going to come out of that thing looking like I did, like they can’t believe it. This is big, Harry. Really, really big.” She drew back so she could see his face, and gave him a teasing smile. “You’re going to be famous.”

Harry laughed, trying to keep it down so as not to anger Madam Pomfrey. “And you know how I’ve always wanted to be famous.” He paused, then said, “I was so proud of you for not saying anything when Malfoy talked to you, at the end there.”

She shook her head. “It was so obvious he was lying. He just wanted some satisfaction. I enjoyed how you didn’t give him any. Well, as much as you can enjoy



anything after suffering that Curse. Oh, it's so horrible. Funny, now Ron's the only one of the six of us who's never had it."

"Let's hope it stays that way," said Harry, to which Ginny nodded fervently. "Poor Pansy," said Ginny, "she didn't have anybody to hold her after she got it. She just got stabbed instead. I feel bad for me, but I feel worse for her."

Harry couldn't think of anything to say to that except to agree, and just continued holding her. After a minute, she said, "The Aurors are going to be desperate to learn that spell, the newest one," she clarified. "We're going to have to give them names. But can you imagine what that would mean to an Auror? How much safer it would make them? I assume that's why you told Tonks and Cassandra to go in."

"Yes, that was why. I don't know if they're going to have any better luck learning this one than the other one, but I hope they can. I wondered if maybe they could see something that would help them."

"I hope so," she said, moving out of the embrace but keeping an arm around him. "I don't know what it would be, but you never know."

A minute later, the eight people in the Pensieve stepped out, and started to approach them. As Ginny had suggested, their faces registered mainly awe.

"Well, Harry, I hardly know where to begin," said Dumbledore with what Harry would have assumed was amusement if the situation had been different. "It is as though we must now take what we understood to be true of what wizards are capable of, throw it out, and start again."

"I just want the Aurors to be able to use it," he said.

"We want to too, Harry," said Cassandra. "But this has staggering implications, even more than the other one."

Looking a little pale, Ron stepped forward. "I don't know about the implications. I'm just glad the both of you are still alive." He sat next to Ginny, and put an arm around her.

Neville nodded. "I thought you were done for, Harry, and this was even knowing that you ended up alive." Harry and his friends chuckled.

"I also liked," added Ron, "how in the face of death, you made sure to annoy Malfoy."

Harry nodded. "Just didn't see any point in indulging him. It's always been a waste of time to talk to him anyway. Especially after what he'd done, I wasn't in the mood to banter." He glanced over at Pansy.

"You kept your temper, I'll say that," said Hermione. "Thank you, Harry," she added, kissing him on the cheek, "for saving two good friends of mine."

"Harry, may the Aurors and I have a word with you?" asked Dumbledore. Harry walked over to the other side of the room, while Hermione, Neville, and Ron talked to Ginny.

Harry stood opposite Dumbledore, with Tonks and Cassandra on either side. "Harry, what is almost as stunning as the newest spell is that you were able to Disapparate out of there," said Dumbledore.

Harry frowned in confusion. "But obviously I was right, that the Chamber of Secrets is underground, and therefore..." He stopped as Dumbledore shook his head.

"The anti-Disapparation field which protects Hogwarts is not only extremely powerful and old, but extends above and below the surface of the ground. The Chamber of Secrets is included in the area from which it should be impossible to Disapparate."

"But that's not possible..." Harry trailed off.

"Neither was stopping a Killing Curse, until tonight," pointed out Cassandra.

"How could I have done that?" asked Harry.

"Harry," said Dumbledore gently, "this is speculation, but it is informed speculation. We have discussed the fact that using the energy of love as a basis for your magic makes you powerful. Without wishing to intrude, it was impossible not

to notice, just before you Disapparated, how you were looking at Ginny, and she at you. I strongly suspect that at that moment you were more powerful than Voldemort, more powerful than myself. I have tried to Disapparate from the Hogwarts grounds, and I cannot. You chose to Apparate outside the Hogwarts gate because you thought you could not Apparate inside. I think if you had tried to Apparate into the infirmary, you would have done so.”

“I don’t know what to say,” said Harry. “I’m as surprised as you are.”

“Well, we should digest this information, and discuss it tomorrow. Perhaps we should leave the young people alone,” Dumbledore said to the others. He headed out, followed by the other two teachers, and one of the Aurors. Tonks stayed behind and moved him over to the other end of the infirmary from his friends.

“Harry, you have to tell her,” said Tonks urgently, keeping her voice down.

“Tell who what?” Harry asked, confused.

Tonks sighed. “Ginny. You’re in love with her, and she is with you. I don’t know if you realized when you let us see that, but it was completely obvious. It had to be one of the most emotional moments of your life, and you didn’t care if we saw it. You’re really something sometimes. But you have to tell her.”

Harry closed his eyes. “I don’t know if I can, Tonks.”

She nodded. “I know you’re scared. I can understand—“

”She almost died just because she’s the person I love most! That’s exactly what scares me so much!” Harry whispered.

“I know,” she said sympathetically. “But like a lot of other things in your life, you’re stuck with it. She knows. She may deny it to herself until you tell her, but her heart knows, and every day you don’t tell her will be a rejection. The reasons won’t matter. The fact is that you’re in love with her and she with you. If you want to not hurt her, you have to tell her. I’m really sorry, but it’s that simple.”

Harry looked down. “I believe you, but... I feel like I can’t bear doing either one.”

Tonks pulled him closer, her face inches from his. “Harry,” she said, gripping his shoulders, “look at what the energy of love did just now. Embrace that energy, Harry. Not just as a concept, but in your life. You deserve it for yourself, and for her. What she said, about even if you starve, it’d at least be together... she meant that, and it meant that she’d rather have a few days of love with you than a lifetime without it. Don’t deprive her of that, or yourself.” She kissed him on the forehead, and left the infirmary.

Harry stood there alone for a moment, lost in thought. He knew Tonks was right, but it was getting up the courage to do something about it that was the problem. So, there was only one thing to do.

He walked over to Ginny’s bed, and gestured to Ron a request that he get up so Harry could sit next to Ginny; Ron did so. Madam Pomfrey seemed to have left the infirmary, so he knew he wouldn’t be interrupted. “Have you ever just gone ahead and done something because you didn’t think you’d have the courage to do it later?” he asked, looking at Ginny.

Ron didn’t seem to notice, because he answered. “Sure, I suppose all of us have, but I don’t see what that has to do with—“

”Sssshh, Ron!” whispered Hermione. Ron looked at her quizzically.

Not caring that three other people were watching, Harry plowed ahead. “Ginny, I’m in love with you.” He said nothing else; suddenly, nothing was as important as her reaction.

She looked dumbfounded, as did Ron and Neville. Hermione smiled joyously and gave a squeak of pleasure, but kept herself in check otherwise. Finally Ginny said, “I thought that you were scared—“

”I am,” he interrupted, his voice heavy with emotion. “I’ve never been so scared of anything in my life. You saw what almost happened tonight. I didn’t even know, consciously, that I felt this way, and even that almost got you killed. But after he’d gone, and I looked at you, I just suddenly realized I felt this way. And I’m

afraid if I don't say it now, then I never will, so I'm saying it. I just hope you feel the same way."

"Are you kidding?" she asked incredulously. "Do you know how long I've wanted... hoped for..." Tears came to her eyes, and she reached out to put her hands on his shoulders, her face against his, almost nose to nose. "And this isn't just as a stupid ten-year-old, this is this year, last year... I was happy to be your friend, I just never thought I had a chance. I thought I saw it in your eyes back there, but I was afraid I was wrong, or that you'd be too scared... Harry, I love you, and I've been in love with you for a long time. There's nothing I want more than this, and I'll take any risk there is to do it."

Hermione was now crying freely, and Ron and Neville looked very happy. Harry felt tears of happiness coming on, and reflexively tried to stop them, though he didn't care if the others saw him cry. "Oh, Ginny," he said, "I'm sorry I didn't realize it until now. I mean, I sort of knew, but I think I tried to push it down. It was just... something I felt like I couldn't have. I just... anyway, I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Harry. Look at me." He did, and love shone from her eyes in a way that he could never have imagined until he saw it. She gently touched his cheek. "Do I look like you should be apologizing to me, for anything?"

He didn't answer, but looked back at her, hoping his feelings showed in his eyes. Ginny smiled brilliantly, her face already close to his. She leaned in a little more and kissed him gently and quickly on the lips, as if not to startle him. She looked at him, smiling, her eyes asking, 'was that okay?' He smiled in response, and she kissed him again, more firmly, for a few seconds. He hoped he was doing it all right; he had no idea, but she seemed pleased enough. They broke apart, their faces still close, and smiled at each other. "I suddenly feel," he said, "like I'd like to do a lot more of that."

"As soon as you want, I'll show you the places on the map," said Hermione happily.

Harry leaned forward and rested his head on her shoulder, his arms around her. "I'm so happy," he whispered. "Me too," she whispered back. He glanced up to see Hermione happier than he'd ever seen her; he wondered if they hadn't quite whispered quietly enough.

Ginny pulled back enough to look into his eyes. "Harry," she said, "I admire you so much for doing this even though you were really scared. But I want you to try not to be. This is the best feeling in the world, this is what life is all about. We have to dive into it, and not think about what could happen." She smiled. "Besides, now that you're in love, your magic will be even stronger."

"Dumbledore thinks that's what happened, actually," he said. He related the conversation he'd had, and the others shook their heads.

"It's still amazing what you did," said Hermione. "But I saw, I think we all saw, that look you exchanged before you Disapparated. It wouldn't surprise me at all."

"That's true," said Ron. "Even I, who's supposed to be emotionally stunted, could see—"

"Stop saying that, Ron, you'll make me feel bad," Hermione admonished him. "Besides, you're getting better."

Ron grinned, though whether it was at her comment or having annoyed her, Harry couldn't tell. "Anyway, that look after Malfoy left... I couldn't mistake that, either. Oh, Ginny, can you imagine Mum's reaction to this?"

Ginny laughed. "She'll be in heaven. This is what she's always wanted."

"Really?" Harry asked. He hadn't known that.

"She's constantly hinted around about it," said Ginny. "It's not like I needed her encouragement, but she did it anyway. Harry, she doesn't think about the danger, not even after Percy. She loves us both, and what mother doesn't want the best possible man for her daughter? Never mind the accomplishments, but the qualities that got you chosen by Fawkes are ones she's known about for a long time, it's why she loves you so much. She'll be ecstatic. Dad'll be happy too, mind you,

but we have to tell her soon. This'll give her something good to think about, you know she's still mourning Percy pretty strongly."

"Too bad vacation just ended," Harry agreed. "When can we tell her?"

"You could tell them, Harry," Hermione pointed out. "You're a teacher, you should be able to come and go as you like."

"I hadn't thought of that," Harry admitted. "But I'd really like to tell them with both of us there. Do you think Dumbledore would give special permission for a quick trip for both of us?"

"Hard to say, he might have security issues," said Ron. "Well, talk to him, anyway, and see what he says. Be sure to mention the cheering-her-up angle."

Harry laughed; the others looked at him inquiringly. "I was just thinking, there were three attempts on my life today, but I'm happier than I've ever been in my life. I knew love was powerful, but..."

Ginny smiled. "If it can do that, I guess we shouldn't be shocked that it can beat the Killing Curse." She reached forward to hug Harry again. "Harry, you have no idea how happy you've made me... this feeling, it's just... Hermione, where were those places again?"

Everyone laughed, Ginny still hugging Harry, as Madam Pomfrey walked into the infirmary. Glancing at them, she said, "I'd say the young lady has had enough recuperation," referring to the hugging. She leaned over to check Pansy.

Ginny whispered to Harry, "You can never have too much recuperation." He giggled, trying not to laugh out loud and further annoy Madam Pomfrey. Not taking her eyes off of Pansy, Madam Pomfrey said, "That was my way of saying that you all should be going now, if you didn't catch my drift."

"We'd really like to stay here and wait with her," said Harry.

"One of you can stay," she conceded. "Not all of you."

"I'll be the one to stay," said Ron. "You two couples go on ahead, look at maps, and stuff."

The others smiled and nodded. Harry stopped by Pansy's bed. "Get better soon, Pansy," he whispered. The others offered similar sentiments as they headed out. Ron pulled up a chair as they left, Neville and Hermione arm in arm, followed by Harry and Ginny, arm in arm as well.

Outside the portrait hole, Harry suddenly changed his mind about going to Gryffindor Tower. "I'm going to Dumbledore's office, to talk to him about the thing about your parents," he told Ginny. Taking a quick look up and down the hall and seeing no one other than Hermione and Neville, he moved in for a quick kiss before heading off. He knew they couldn't be doing that in public, but the novelty and the excitement were exhilarating. He walked off towards Dumbledore's office.

He knocked on the door, which opened, and he walked in. Tonks and Cassandra were standing; apparently they had been on their way out. He greeted them, which seemed to give them more than enough information. Tonks grinned. "You told her, didn't you? It's all over your face." Harry smiled broadly, which came naturally to him right then. Tonks made a sound of delight. "All right, Harry! You did it!"

He looked at her earnestly. "Seriously, Tonks, it's thanks to you, what you said. I just made up my mind to go over and do it. I don't think I would have otherwise."

"She was very happy, I assume," said Cassandra.

"Yes, she was," said Harry. "It was just the reaction you hope for when you tell someone you're in love with them, I would imagine."

They congratulated him, said goodbye, and left. Dumbledore looked up at Harry. "I believe, Harry, that I have never seen you anywhere near as happy as you are right now. It gives me great pleasure."

"Thank you, sir. I had never imagined what this felt like. It's ironic, since I've been using the energy of love for my spells, but only now do I realize what it



feels like when it's as strong as this. Ginny was saying, no wonder it can defeat the Killing Curse."

"Indeed. What is also ironic is that had Malfoy not used that particular device to attempt to lure you to your doom, you probably would not have discovered what you have now discovered."

"Yes, sir. Particularly since how it works is exactly why I was so reluctant in the first place. What I wanted to ask you, sir, was about how soon I can meet the Weasleys to tell them this. Ron and Ginny have told me that Molly has been hoping for this, and I'd like to give her some good news for a change."

Dumbledore looked at him affectionately. "That is very thoughtful, Harry. I am pleased to be able to tell you that I contacted them after Ginny went missing. They are en route, and should be here any time now."

"That's great, sir. I'll go get Ginny. Where should we meet them?"

"I believe the staff room should be available, as the hour is late. I will escort them there when they arrive. You and Ginny should go straight there."

"Thank you, sir." He left Dumbledore's office and headed back to Gryffindor Tower. He felt as though he wanted to run, he had so much energy. Now this is really the energy of love, he thought.

He walked up to the portrait of the Fat Lady. "Fish and chips," he said, and he climbed in. He was immediately accosted by some first years wanting to hear his account of what had happened. "I'm sorry, I can't, there's people waiting for us. Ginny," he shouted. She ran over. "Your parents are on the way, they'll be here any time." They climbed out again, and walked toward the staff room, hand in hand.

"Harry," she said, "would you believe me if I told you that you were only gone for ten minutes, but I missed you?"

He grinned. "Yes, I would. I feel like I don't want to do anything else but be with you. Now I really wish this had happened before vacation."

“Well, look on the bright side, Harry, that it happened at all. You would have gone on for who knows how long, a few years maybe, never letting yourself feel like this. I’m just so glad that didn’t happen.”

“I see what you mean. I could easily imagine that happening. It’s almost scary now to think about that.”

“Well, we don’t have to think about it if we don’t want to, since it didn’t happen,” she said happily. “Where are we going?”

“The staff room,” he answered.

“Too bad Hermione’s not here, she’s always wanted to go in there,” joked Ginny. Looking at him as they walked, she asked, “So, you felt this way, but you didn’t know?”

He thought for a few seconds. “I’m not sure... like I said, I just felt like it was something I couldn’t have. If I ever started thinking about it, the fear would take over, and it made me stop. But I think in some way, I knew. It’s kind of hard to explain.”

She put her arm around his waist as they walked, and squeezed him. “I’m sorry, Harry. That must have been really hard. I know you must still be scared. But I’m serious, even if something happened to one of us tomorrow, I’d never regret this. Some things are so good they’re worth taking risks for, and this is definitely one. If you feel anything like I do, you’ll know that’s true.”

“Before this happened, I’m not sure I would have believed that,” he answered. “But feeling the way I feel right now, I know you’re right. I’m still scared, but I’m glad I did this. I wouldn’t take it back even if I could. I never imagined that it felt like this.” She squeezed him again as they approached the staff room.

They walked in, and Arthur and Molly were standing in the middle of the room, talking to Dumbledore. “Harry! Ginny!” exclaimed Molly, rushing toward them, hugging them both at once, one with each arm. “Oh, thank goodness you’re all right. Now, what happened?”

Dumbledore excused himself, and Harry started telling the story. Molly reacted very strongly to it, gasping when he told her what had happened to Pansy, about Ginny undergoing the Cruciatus Curse, and upon hearing how he was held in place by Malfoy. Harry discovered that when he took out everything Malfoy said, the story didn't take that long to tell. When Harry got to the part about the newest spell, their jaws dropped, and they were speechless. Finally Arthur said, "I was wondering how you could have gotten out of that... amazing... but how did you even get out of the Chamber?"

"I Disapparated out, and carried Ginny."

"But you can't Disapparate out of anyplace in Hogwarts," pointed out Arthur.

"I thought the Chamber might be different, since it was underground. So I tried, and it worked. It was only afterwards that I found out that I shouldn't have been able to do it."

Again, the Weasleys looked stunned. "So, how did you do it?" asked Molly.

"Well, that brings us to the best part of the story," said Ginny, obviously relishing the anticipation of her mother's reaction. "You see, something else happened that's even better than Harry finding a shield for the Killing Curse."

Both Weasleys raised their eyebrows. "This ought to be good," mused Arthur.

"Something about what happened down there, I'm not sure what it was," explained Harry, "but... after I knew Ginny was safe, and I hugged her and looked at her, something just clicked... and I realized that I was in love with her. After we got back to the infirmary, I told her." Ginny's beaming face provided its own commentary.

Molly let out a high-pitched squeal of joy, and reached out and hugged Ginny hard, causing her to gasp for breath. After a few seconds, she did the same with Harry. Then she hugged her husband, who just smiled. "That's wonderful," he said. "We're really very happy for you." He paused, then added, "At least I am, I

can't speak for Molly." She lightly and playfully hit his arm, as Harry and Ginny laughed.

"Oh, my, I'm so happy I can barely say anything," said Molly, still ecstatic. "It's so wonderful... Ginny, how do you feel?"

She just smiled at her mother and, instead of answering, turned to Harry and planted a firm kiss on his lips. After five seconds, she released him. He felt a bit dazed, but happy. "That should answer your question," said Ginny.

"It does," said her beaming mother. "You know there are places you can go to be alone, right?"

Harry was taken slightly aback at a girl's mother suggesting such a thing, but then he thought, most girls' mothers aren't quite this happy at their daughter's choice of a boyfriend. "Yes, Mum, Hermione said she'll tell us where they all are," said Ginny. "The only problem, of course, is that Harry's so busy. Saturdays with the Aurors, him and Neville teaching us what they learn from them, homework, teaching... we won't have as much time as most students. But I'll take what time with him that I can get."

"You'll get all I can give you, believe me," said Harry. Molly beamed again and rubbed Harry's head.

"Not to get off the subject, because this is really terrific," said Arthur, "but what does it have to do with Disapparating out of the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Well, you know that I've gotten used to using the energy of love for all my magic now," explained Harry. "Just before I Disapparated, I looked at her, and felt this powerful feeling of love, more than I had ever felt. Professor Dumbledore thinks that was what got us out of there, that it made my magic that powerful. He said he can't do what I did."

Molly and Arthur looked amazed again. "Yeah, I know, I kind of feel that way myself," agreed Harry. "But right now, I'm much happier about Ginny than I am about that, or the new shield."

“You sweet boy,” said Molly fondly, touching his face. “Oh, my... we came out here just hoping there wouldn’t be a disaster, and we find out this... this is just so wonderful, we love you both so much...”

“I’m really glad, Molly,” said Harry. “I didn’t know you’d feel this way. I would have thought you’d be concerned about the extra danger it brings to Ginny.”

She looked at him sadly, though still very happy. “Harry, you have to understand, I love you as much as I love the children I gave birth to. I’m always concerned about the danger you’re in, and it endangered Ron and Ginny anyway. She won’t be in that much more danger by being the girl you love. Yes, I’m concerned, but I would never let it affect how I feel about this. You two are so good for each other, you both love so well...” Molly was practically swooning. “There’s going to be wonderful grandchildren from this, I can feel it.”

“I was wondering how long after we told her it was going to take before we heard the word ‘grandchildren,’” joked Ginny.

“Molly, she’s only fifteen,” pointed out Arthur. “You don’t want to go giving her ideas.”

“I already have ideas,” Ginny said, raising her eyebrows and grinning at Harry. “Don’t worry, Dad, I’m not in a hurry for children. But I know what Mum means, just eventually. I know Mum, tomorrow she’ll be picking out wedding patterns.”

“I will not,” said Molly unconvincingly. Arthur chuckled.

Harry looked at Ginny. “She might as well. The way I feel isn’t going to change. I’m sure of that.” He knew as he said it that he was saying a lot, but he also knew that even though he said it impulsively, it was how he felt, and he didn’t regret saying it.

Ginny looked at him with boundless love, and hugged him, her eyes starting to tear up. Molly’s were as well. Ginny held his shoulders and said, “I love you so much, Harry... I feel like there’s so much I want to say, but I just don’t have the words.”

He nodded. "I know what you mean, I felt that way earlier. It's just... an amazing feeling."

Arthur took a step toward them. "You know we're both thrilled for you, and Harry, I know you mean what you say. I'm sure I said the same thing to Molly thirty-two years ago; when we fell in love, we were about the same ages you are now. But I'm the practical one, so I want to give you both some practical advice. There are dangers and problems in any relationship, no matter how happy, so I want to give you some warning of the most common ones.

"The most important thing is to always talk, always communicate. If you're unhappy about something to do with the other person, you'll want to not say anything, so you don't upset them. But believe me, you pay a price in the end for that. You'll store up resentments and unhappiness, and it'll be harder to deal with later on. You always have to say when something's bothering you, even if it seems irrational, and the other person has to respect that person's feelings. If you don't, it'll be that much harder, eventually."

"Believe me, we know," added Molly. "We have a lot of hard-earned experience. We just hope it can be less hard for you."

Harry and Ginny nodded, both serious now. Harry was trying to digest this; he was barely used to the idea of being in a relationship, so it was all a bit much.

"A lot of men, Harry, have the problem of at times not being attentive or thoughtful enough," continued Arthur. "It kind of seems like that may not be such a problem for you. I hope that's the case. But you may have to be especially cognizant of Ginny's feelings, because this may be harder for her than for you at times, for the same reasons that sometimes you don't like being Harry Potter."

"How do you mean, Dad?" asked Ginny.

"Well, Ginny, you have gotten yourself—and I don't mean to embarrass you, Harry, I'm just trying to state an objective truth—the most desirable boy in your age range in the entire wizarding world." Harry tried, not very successfully, not to be embarrassed as Ginny and Molly smiled at him. "Good as that is, there will be

drawbacks. He's going to get a lot of attention from people, many of whom he doesn't know, and he has to be polite and attentive to that, since he's so famous, and now a public person. You're going to feel like there are too many people tugging at him. He's still going to get attention from women, even though they'll know he's taken. I can't imagine there won't be times when you'll feel jealous, if not of a specific woman, then just anybody who puts a demand on Harry's time. That's going to be hard for you, and Harry, you need to recognize that, and try to be understanding of it, if she acts put out by it at times."

Molly raised her eyebrows. "This is, of course, from Arthur's long experience of being highly popular, sought after by many women, demands on his time..."

"And thank goodness for that," he replied, accepting her joke well. "I wouldn't want the celebrity thing any more than Harry does. But, as he knows, he's stuck with it, and now Ginny is too. Honey, you're going to start seeing your name in the Prophet, and it won't always be complimentary."

She nodded. "I already knew that, from Harry's experience last year. But they can say anything they want about me, I don't care as long as I have him."

"I know that's true. I'm just saying, it won't be easy at times."

"I was just thinking," recalled Harry, "when Tonks talked to me about girlfriends, she said the most important thing to remember is, 'the girl as always right.'"

The others chuckled. "Not always, I would argue," said Arthur. "More than half the time, definitely. I think women are just naturally better at relationships than men. It's possible that Tonks meant that even if the girl seems to you to be wrong, you can't dismiss it, you have to realize she could be right even if it seems impossible to you that she is. Or, to put it another way, her feelings are never wrong, they just are. You can never say 'you shouldn't feel that way,' because she does, and can't help it."

“Yes, that phrase is a big danger sign,” agreed Molly. “Another one is, if one of you says, ‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ that’s exactly the time to talk about it. That’s where relationships can be hard. You do things you find very hard to do, because you love the other person and don’t want to cause them pain. That’s very basic, but also hard at times. If you love someone and they’re in pain, you do everything you can to help them. If you do that, you can deal with whatever comes along.”

“I’m pretty sure I can do that,” said Harry.

Looking into his eyes, Ginny said, “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, Harry. If you’re in pain for any reason, whether or not it has to do with me, I want to know. Please don’t ever keep what you’re going through from me, even if you mean to protect me.”

“I’ll try,” he said, though knowing he would want to protect her.

“Oh, and one other thing,” added Arthur. “Revel in this feeling you have now, enjoy it for all it’s worth. I don’t mean stop studying, but just stop frequently to appreciate it, and each other. I didn’t mean to depress you with all this serious advice, like this is some chore you have to start working at. It should be joyful, and it will be. I just want to save you some pain if I can.”

“Well, we should get back home now, we know you can’t be out of Gryffindor Tower past a certain time.” Molly hugged Harry, saying, “It’s not only Ginny you’ve made very happy, Harry.” She then hugged Ginny, whispering something to her which caused her to giggle. Molly and Arthur said goodbye and left the staff room.

Harry and Ginny stayed for a moment. “Can you tell me what she whispered to you?” Harry asked.

Ginny giggled again. Because they were alone, she leaned over and gave him a long kiss. They both smiled, then she answered his question. “She said that her and Dad’s favorite spot was near the lake, behind some bushes against the castle wall.”



Harry chuckled. "Boy, will I get teased in here tomorrow. John and Flitwick, I imagine, will have a lot of fun with me, and McGonagall will probably have a comment. They'll be impressed about the other thing, and they'll say that, too, but it'll mainly be about you."

They left the staff room. "You like it that they do that, don't you?"

"Of course; they do it because they like me, and it's all in fun. They often have a go at each other. Except Snape, of course. But one reason I like getting teased is it means I can do it to them, too. I usually don't, but I do if I think of something good. It's just very comfortable."

"I'm glad, Harry. You're just a likable person."

He put an arm around her. "Just so long as you keep liking me."

"Not much danger of that stopping," she assured him.

Back in Gryffindor Tower, they were greeted with more questions, which Harry now had time to answer, Ginny at his side. He, and they, were congratulated by many, which seemed to please Ginny even more than Harry. "I'm not used to being the center of attention, like you are," she said at one point.

"Better get used to it," he replied.

Finally they sat with Neville and Hermione, who they told about the conversation with the Weasleys. Hermione, still in a state of high excitement, asked for their maps, and ran off to her dormitory. When she got back, she returned their maps to them.

"A little modification I made for mine when Neville and I got together," she explained. "You know how I set yours to sound an alarm if Crabbe or Malfoy got anywhere near you? I had already made a similar one on mine; I changed mine so that it could be set to make a soft beeping noise if anyone got to within ten yards of us. It was very useful in certain situations, situations which I think you'll be finding yourself in too."

Ginny told them what her mother had whispered, and they chuckled. "Yes, that's a good one," Hermione agreed. "Here, I'll show you the others."

She laid the map out in front of them, making sure no one else could see. They no longer needed them for defense, thought Harry, but it was good to put them to another, happier use.

Harry and Neville left their dormitory a little early the next morning; Ron had not come back. Harry wondered if Ron's status as a prefect had anything to do with Madam Pomfrey not throwing him out of the infirmary. Ginny and Hermione were waiting for them in the common room. Harry knew he had to get used to the idea that they couldn't be too physically affectionate in places like the common room or the halls, but he had to think to stop himself from kissing Ginny anyway. They settled for exchanging very happy looks.

They had decided the night before to stop by the infirmary before breakfast to see how Pansy was doing. As they entered, Harry saw Ron and Pansy talking, Ron holding Pansy's hand. When Ron saw them, he put it down quickly, and stood up to greet them.

"She's doing a lot better," said Ron. "Still can't get up, and shouldn't, but Madam Pomfrey says she should only have to spend one more night here, then she can leave."

"It's so good to see you all, thank you for coming by like this, as soon as you could," said Pansy.

"We would have all stayed the night if Madam Pomfrey had let us," Hermione assured her. "When did you wake up?"

"At about three o'clock," said Pansy. "Ron was still awake, but he looked tired. He kept saying he wasn't tired, but he was really lying."

As the others laughed, Ron said, "Well, once you woke up I wasn't tired. I had someone to talk to."

She smiled and took his hand again. "He was just paying me back for that night I spent talking to him last month."

Ron looked embarrassed to have his hand held in front of the others. “I would have done it anyway,” he said.

Harry sat down on the other side of the bed from Ron. “Pansy, I’m so sorry that happened. We shouldn’t have left you alone, we would have been better off making sure the whole school knew, and looked out for you. We should have had protection in your dormitory—“

She cut him off. “Harry, you can’t think like that, you can’t blame yourself for everything. Dumbledore thought it was okay, everyone did except you. I never expected him to come after me, only you. It’s the chance I took. It’s easy to see this kind of thing in retrospect. It was awful, I admit, but I’m okay now. I don’t regret anything, and if I had to suffer, I’m proud of the reason it happened.” Harry was very proud of her, but still distressed at what she had suffered for him. Seeing this, she changed the subject. “Ron told me about you two, I’m so happy for you. He described what happened here last night, I spent a half hour pressing him for every little detail. You haven’t lived until you’ve tried to get Ron to describe a touching emotional scene in full detail.”

The others laughed again, and even Ron couldn’t keep a grin off his face. “It wasn’t that bad,” he admonished her. “I’m going to have to take lessons from Harry on how to get rid of this reputation I have.”

“All you have to do is watch him, Ron,” teased Ginny. “That’s all the lesson you’ll need.”

Pansy, Neville, and Hermione laughed. “That was pretty good, Ginny,” said Pansy. “You managed to tease both of them—Ron for his discomfort with emotion, and Harry for his modesty—with one comment.” Then she said, “Seriously, it’s wonderful. I know you’ll be really happy together.”

“You should have seen them after we left the infirmary,” said a smiling Hermione. “They were both so giddy. It was like they had been given too many Cheering Charms.”

Ginny shook her head. “No Cheering Charm could have made me as happy as I was last night, as happy as I am now.”

They all talked for another ten minutes. All five, including Ron, were going to go to breakfast, but Pansy asked Harry to stay back, and he did, after exchanging a goodbye glance with Ginny. As they left, Harry heard Ron asking Hermione if she could whip him up a potion that would keep him awake all day. Harry imagined that she would give him a lecture on not depending on potions for that kind of thing, then do it anyway.

“You’re still giddy, Harry,” Pansy said. “It really suits you.”

“Thanks,” he replied, glad that she was happy for him. “Should we be expecting any announcements about you and Ron anytime soon?”

“Why do you say that?”

“He dropped your hand a little too fast when we came in,” Harry explained. “If he was just doing it as a friend, like he might for Hermione, he wouldn’t have cared what we saw when we came in.”

“Very perceptive, Harry. I don’t know... I can tell he likes me, and I think it may be in that way. I’m just not sure. I’ll ask Hermione later, she knows him better than me. But considering how un-expressive he’s supposed to be, he’s been fairly expressive. Who knows, maybe he’s just trying to be different with me. Maybe he was being extra nice because of what happened to me, or my spending the night talking to him after Percy died. It’s hard to say. I don’t think he’s just going to come out and say ‘I’m in love with you’ like you did with Ginny. That was pretty impressive.”

“It’s like jumping into a pool not knowing whether it’s warm or cold, you just have to decide to do it,” Harry said. “I knew I had a good chance of a positive reaction; the hardest thing was getting past my fears. You know how I worry,” he joked. “Still, I was really nervous. So how are you on Ron?”

“I really like him, of course. I think I need to spend more time with him to be sure, in more normal situations, but I really like what I’ve seen. We’ll just have to see how it goes. I know the rest of you will be trying to push us together.”

Harry smiled. “I’d be very happy to see it, of course. And Hermione would love it. She and you could gang up on teasing Ron. I think she noticed the thing with the hand like I did; I hope she doesn’t tease him about it.”

“I don’t think she will, Harry. I think she knows what to tease him about and what not to.” She looked at him seriously. “I asked you to stay back because there’s something I want you to do for me. I think it’s something you’re not going to want to do, and I wouldn’t blame you.”

Harry was surprised she would say such a thing, after what she had done for him. “Pansy, there’s literally nothing I wouldn’t do for you. Just ask.”

She gestured to the Pensieve two yards away. “Professor Dumbledore must have left that there from last night. I want to put my memory of what happened yesterday in there. I want you to see it.”

Now Harry understood why she had said he wouldn’t want to do as she asked, but he knew he couldn’t refuse her anything. He nodded somberly. “Of course, I’ll do it. I am curious as to why, though.”

She nodded. “I know, but it’ll be easier to explain after you’ve seen it; you may even know without my telling you.”

He moved the Pensieve over closer to the bed, and told her how to move her memories over. She did, and he put a finger inside.

He was standing in Pansy’s dormitory; she was alone. She was putting something away in her trunk. She turned around and gave a start as Malfoy suddenly appeared in front of her, out of nowhere.

“Draco!” she gasped, slipping into her acting mode, Harry could tell. “What are you doing here? How did you—“

Unfortunately, Malfoy wasn’t buying it. “Shut up, you lying bitch!” he said quietly, with fury, as he Silenced her with his wand. “If you scream when I lift the

Silencing, I'll kill you immediately. You have one chance to tell me the truth. Why did you betray me?"

"Draco, I don't know what you're—"

He silenced her again. "Wrong answer, Pansy. Crucio!"

She screamed silently and collapsed, writhing uncontrollably. Harry wanted to look away, but didn't, out of respect for what Pansy had done, and suffered. It was very painful for him to watch, even as a memory that he knew was long over. But not long for her, he imagined. He felt he understood why she wanted him to see it; she would live with this for the rest of her life, and she wanted someone else to know exactly what she had been through. He was a little surprised she hadn't chosen Ron, however.

She screamed in agony for what Harry guessed was about fifteen seconds before Malfoy stopped it and lifted the Silencing again. She breathed heavily and whimpered, still in shock. Pitiless, Malfoy knelt and leaned over her.

"I know what you did. Why did you do it?"

She took another few seconds to recover, then looked up. Now, her expression was defiant. "For him," she said.

Harry's name had not yet been spoken, but it was clear to Malfoy who she meant. He looked outraged and stunned. "You... you let me... touch you... to save him?"

Harry cringed. Oh, my God, I did not want to know that, he thought. Then he was immediately ashamed of himself for the thought. If she can suffer it, the least I can do is know about it if she wants me to, he told himself. But he was still terribly pained at the thought of what she had done.

Pansy nodded. "Why?" asked Malfoy quietly.

"I love him," said Pansy. "He's noble, brave, kind, and selfless. He suffered terribly to help all wizards everywhere. And he's right, you can't possibly understand it, you'll tell yourself some lie to make yourself feel strong. He'll beat Voldemort one day, and I wanted to make sure he stayed alive to get the chance."

Fury reasserted itself as the dominant feature on Malfoy's face. He Silenced her again, and again said "Crucio!"

Pansy screamed noiselessly again, pain and terror on her face. Malfoy kept it going for a good deal longer this time; Harry was sure it was longer than a minute. As it continued, Harry recalled how Neville had felt last night; even though he knew Pansy was fine, right then, he feared for her sanity. He wondered how long it took before that became a risk. His memories of how it felt came flooding back, and it had lasted far less long for him.

Finally, it stopped. Pansy gasped and lay limp, unmoving, eyes glazed. "Still want to sing his praises? Tempt me, and I'll send you the way of Longbottom's parents. Go on, say some more nice things about him."

Pansy looked very afraid, which Harry could positively understand. She said nothing.

"Well, I guess you're not so stupid as to let yourself get tortured when you can help it, unlike your hero," Malfoy sneered. "Tell me, Pansy, does he love you too?"

Shedding some of her fear, she spoke again. "I'll never be worthy of him. He would never say that, but it's true." Harry noticed that she hadn't directly answered his question.

Malfoy shook his head in wonder. "I swear, he addles everyone he comes in contact with. If he has some special power, it's to make people stupid. Well, you'd better hope he doesn't, because if he does, you'll be dead very shortly, along with him. Of course, you might prefer that than what I've got planned for you."

He Silenced, then Cursed her again, this time for about thirty seconds. Again Harry winced as he saw her endure unimaginable pain. Just that thirty seconds, he knew, was more than he'd suffered in all his dreams combined. When it was over, she lay limp again. Far too weak to stop him, Pansy gasped for breath again as Malfoy got out a small, sharp knife. Harry cringed again, knowing what was coming. Malfoy used the knife to tear her robes and shirt, exposing her stomach.

He started below and to the left of her navel, cutting upwards, then down, then up again. She screamed and tried to move, but could hardly manage any movement. As the blood flowed from the cut, Malfoy took the knife's edge and turned up one side of the cut, as if curious to see what was underneath her skin. Harry was revolted that anybody, even Malfoy, could do such a thing.

Malfoy moved from where he'd been as the blood started to reach the floor, and moved to kneel behind her head. "Now, you and he will have even more in common, so you should be happy about that," he said with a cruel smile. "If you're lucky, you'll die of blood loss before anyone finds you. A small penalty for betraying me like you did. But if you survive, you'll pay a higher price. I'll take my time, I'll wait until you're defenseless and alone, and I'll take the time I don't have now to do this right. You'll be pleading for me to kill you quickly, and maybe I will, if you plead well enough. Or maybe I'll just give you an hour of the Curse, who knows. I wouldn't want to ruin the surprise. But you shouldn't be surprised to see me again, because you will. And I'll be looking forward to it."

He took something out of his robes and adjusted it, and the doorway that Harry had come through suddenly appeared. Without a look back, Malfoy walked through it. Pansy fumbled through her torn robes for her Galleon; finding it, she pressed it. Harry was amazed that she had enough strength to do that much. Suddenly, Pansy was standing up, frozen in place, putting something away in her trunk. The memory was over, and Harry pulled his finger out of the Pensieve.

Pansy looked at him, and he took her hand, looking at her with intense sorrow. "I can barely remember what happened, when it's in there," she said. "I wish I could leave it there. But I know I can't." Harry showed her how to restore her memories, and she did.

She sat up halfway, leaning on one elbow. Harry leaned forward and hugged her, trying to be gentle out of concern for her injury. He desperately wished he could take away her pain. He moved his head and looked into her eyes, wanting her to see how he felt.



“I’m sorry, Harry,” she said quietly. “I know that was really, really unpleasant. You probably still wonder—“

”I think I know,” he said, equally quietly. “You wanted somebody to know what you’d been through. Seeing it is different from hearing about it.”

She nodded. “Partly that. I didn’t want you to feel bad for me especially, though I knew you would, that it would be really painful for you. That’s why I’m sorry. But something in me wants to know, needs to know that you know what I suffered for you. Maybe that’s selfish, I don’t know. But at the same time, I feel like I didn’t suffer it only for you. I feel like I had a debt to pay for all the stuff I’d done before. I think it’s safe to say that I’ve paid it, that I can look in the mirror now. That may sound stupid, but it’s what I feel.

“And also... I am scared of him coming back for me. I know he can’t get me at Hogwarts, but there’s no reason he can’t get me during the summer. I’m sure he’ll do what he says he’ll do.”

“I won’t let it happen,” he said fervently. “I’ll do whatever it takes, I’ll get the Aurors to protect you or get Dumbledore to keep you at Hogwarts over the summer if I have to. But I will not let anything happen to you. I’ll keep you safe until Malfoy is caught, like you kept me safe.” Harry didn’t truly know that he could make that happen, but he knew he was determined. He would do something.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said. “That was another reason I showed you. I wanted you to know why I was scared. I’m not as brave as you are, you would face that without running for help.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” he said. “Voldemort’s after me, but Dumbledore arranges for my protection. Fortunately, I’m getting stronger, and may not need it that much longer. I’m also going to find out if there’s some way I can protect you personally, be your own personal Auror. But you shouldn’t be ashamed of being scared. What you went through was horrible, and the thought that worse could happen in the future... I understand why you wanted me to see it. I won’t let anything happen to you, Pansy,” he repeated, willing it to be true.

“I know. I see it in your eyes, you’ll do anything you possibly can. Knowing that makes me feel better. I know how you are when you’re that determined, nothing will stop you.”

“No, it won’t,” he agreed, still meeting her eyes. She looked reassured, and happier. After a few seconds, he asked, “How’s your stomach doing? Is the cut healing all right?”

By way of answer, she reached down and pulled up her blouse enough to completely expose her stomach. Harry did a double-take as he could see no evidence that there had ever been an injury. He moved his head closer to get a better look, then backed away a bit and glanced up at her, embarrassed that maybe he was looking too closely. She chuckled and said, “Go ahead, look as closely as you want.” He did, and could still see nothing. Eyebrows high, he looked at her inquiringly.

“Madam Pomfrey was pretty surprised too,” Pansy said, pulling her blouse back down. “She’s sure it was because of Fawkes. When she first saw it, she knew it wasn’t deep enough to be life-threatening, but she thought there would be a scar. So I’ll be sure to thank Fawkes the next time I see him.

“By the way, I wanted to make sure you knew... when I said to Malfoy that I loved you, it was in the same way as you said it to me on that card. I knew that Malfoy would take it the other way, and I was happy to have him do that. I just wanted to make him mad. Guess that wasn’t such a good idea.”

“He’d have done all that stuff to you anyway, Pansy,” Harry said. “And I understood how you meant it, in the memory. But you were wrong about what you said after that; there’s nothing that would make you not worthy of me.” He saw a skeptical look, then continued. “Please don’t tell anyone this, because I haven’t told Ginny, and I don’t know if I will... but after Hermione and Neville got together, I started thinking about the idea of a girlfriend more, because I saw how happy they were. It wasn’t serious, because I knew I wouldn’t let myself have one, at least I thought. I thought, maybe in a couple of years... but I daydreamed about it. When I

did, I thought about Ginny, but I also thought about you. It didn't happen to turn out that way, but my point is that it never occurred to me that you weren't worthy of me. I felt like it was very possible."

She smiled and squeezed his hand. "Thank you, Harry. That's one of the nicest things you've ever said to me, and you've said a lot. It means so much to me. I suppose that was just something I told myself so I wouldn't let myself think about it too much. I had to try hard not to fall in love with you. It would have been so easy... anyway, thank you."

Harry nodded, and gripped her hand more tightly. "You spent a lot of time talking to Ron. Did you tell him what happened, what I saw?"

She nodded. "He was so angry at Malfoy, he really wanted to kill him. He said a lot of nice things about me, about what I did all year. He was very sweet. He really can be, when he wants to be. I told him almost everything, but I did leave out one thing. You can probably guess which one."

"I think so," he said. "And I can guess why. If you do end up with him, you don't want that image in his head."

"Yes, that's right. You're the only one who knows, and it's going to stay that way."

Harry shook his head. "I think Hermione knows," he said. To her inquiring look, he added, "I didn't understand it at the time, but... when you signaled yesterday afternoon, we got out the map to find Malfoy, to see if he was anywhere nearby. She was the one looking at the map, and she—"

"Saw us in one of the places that couples go for privacy," Pansy finished. "Did she say anything about it?"

"No, she just didn't say anything for a minute, then she said she saw you moving. But then later, in Dumbledore's office, when you said you got Malfoy to tell you what he'd done, she kind of twitched. Now, knowing what happened, I can put it together. She had to have figured it out. I was wondering why she hugged you like

that, she must have felt awful for you, and grateful for what you did. But she won't tell anyone, I'm sure of that."

"She's pretty clever, we all know that," Pansy mused. "I think that was why Malfoy was so vicious. I poured on the charm, sympathy, flattery, you name it. I was afraid I might be overdoing it, but he's weak and vain, and it worked. He'd been after me to let him do that for over a year. It was revolting, but I'm proud that I did it."

Harry shook his head in wonder. "There's a big part of me that would rather you hadn't done that, even though I'd be dead if you hadn't," he admitted. "But I know you chose it, and that you're proud of it. It's... just so much..." He trailed off for a minute, then continued, emotion in his voice. "That you would do that for me... it means more to me than I can say."

"I know," she said, her appreciation coming through in her tone. "It's funny, horrible as the Curse was... if I'd known that's what I had to endure to save your life, I would still have done it. I remember when you took on Voldemort in those dreams, I said I couldn't do what you were doing. But I guess I did, in my own way. At that time, I never would have been able to. I suppose it's just a matter of having something you feel really strongly about."

Harry looked back at her, not knowing what to say. He squeezed her hand again. "Thank you," he finally said, knowing it was nowhere near what he wanted to say.

"You deserve it," she said. "It's like what Hermione said at the award presentation, thanking you for being the kind of person you can do that for." After a few seconds, she let go of his hand. "I should let you get on down to breakfast, you don't have tons of time now."

"I'll come back after lunch," he said. "I'm sure we all will."

"Madam Pomfrey will love that," she smiled.

He looked at her again, thinking of what she'd been through. "I love you, Pansy. I love you very much."

“I know,” she said. “I love you too, Harry. Now, go to breakfast.”

He picked up his bag, looked at her again, and left the infirmary. Reaching the Hall, as he walked to his usual seat, he heard some people start to applaud. By the time he got to his seat, it had reached a crescendo. Hermione looked up at him and said, “Professor Dumbledore just finished talking a few minutes ago. He showed them images of you and your newest shield.”

“Did he mention Pansy?” Harry asked. She shook her head.

Harry made a sudden decision; he couldn’t bear being applauded while Pansy lay in the infirmary alone. He dropped his bag at his seat, walked up to the teachers’ table, and stood before the magical microphone, which was still activated. The applause died down, as people were clearly curious to hear what he had to say.

“Thank you for that,” he began. He wasn’t sure what he was going to say exactly, but he found he wasn’t nervous. After teaching for seven months, he realized, large groups didn’t bother him anymore.

“Some of you may know that Pansy Parkinson is in the infirmary now, recovering from an attack she suffered yesterday. What you don’t know is that she’s been helping me all year. She’s been pretending to be Malfoy’s friend, being a spy, essentially, to help keep me safe.

“She saved my life yesterday, and it was the second time. In January, she warned me that Goyle was dangerous, and that warning saved my life. Without her help, then and yesterday, I would be dead.” The Hall was totally quiet when he paused.

“She was attacked yesterday evening because Malfoy found out what she’d done. He assaulted her in her dormitory. He put her under the Cruciatu Curse three times, for a total of two minutes. For the Curse, that’s an eternity. Believe me, I know. Then he cut her with a knife. Not in passion, but coldly. She could easily have bled to death.

“I’m telling you this because I want you to know who she is, who she really is, what she’s done. She came to me in early September and told me she wanted to

help me, she wanted to become a different person. In the time since then, I've gotten to know her well, and she's become a very close friend. All this year, she's loathed Malfoy, but pretended to be his friend for my sake, suffered the dislike and mistrust of the entire school, to keep me safe... and has now paid an even worse price for it. I..." His voice started to break; he paused for a few seconds, then continued. "I can never repay her for what she's done. She's not the person you think she is. I ask you, if you support me, please support her. Thank you."

As he walked away from the podium, he heard more applause; he hoped it was for Pansy, not for him. He noticed that all the teachers were in their seats, and were applauding as well. He passed Hagrid—how did I not notice him before? he thought—who smiled and patted him gently on the back as he passed. He sat down with his friends at the Gryffindor table.

Hermione had tears in her eyes. "That was beautiful, Harry," she enthused. Sitting across from him, Ginny reached out for his hand. "It really was," she agreed. Ron, now on Harry's right side, patted him on the shoulder. "Well done, mate," he said. Now I'm sure he's interested in Pansy, thought Harry, amused.

"It was the least I could do," he said. "After what she's been through, she deserves the support of the whole school. I just hope she gets it."

"She will, Harry," said Neville. "People will follow where you lead them."

"He's right, of course," agreed Hermione. "Don't worry, Harry."

"Why did she have you stay back?" asked Ron.

"The Pensieve was still there. She wanted to show me what had happened."

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Why didn't she show all of us?"

"It was really painful to watch, Ron," said Harry, wincing inwardly at the memory. "It was awful. I know you would have anyway, we all would have. She didn't want to subject you all to it. But she wanted to know that one person knew exactly what had happened to her, and I think it was me because I was the one she was doing it for, who she suffered it for. Believe me, you wouldn't want to see it."

“I believe it,” affirmed Ron. “She told me about it in detail, I was just finishing telling them when Dumbledore spoke. It sounded horrible.”

“It was,” Harry said.

“If I ever manage to get my hands on Malfoy...” Ron said, not needing to finish the sentence. The anger Harry saw in Ron’s eyes was further evidence to Harry that Ron had feelings for Pansy.

“I know how you feel,” Harry said. “I told her I would find a way to protect her. I’m not sure how I will, but one way or the other, I will.”

Ginny squeezed his hand. “I know you will, Harry. We’ll all help if we can. I’m especially grateful for her saving your life, you know.”

Harry smiled broadly for the first time since seeing Pansy. Feelings about what had happened to her had dominated his thoughts, but now, looking at Ginny brought the feelings he’d had last night flooding back. She smiled at him, love in her eyes. “Harry,” she said, “it makes me so happy, that even after all that, just looking at me can make you that happy again.”

“I’m sure it always will make me that happy,” he said.

“I saw that look, Ron,” said Ginny, annoyed. “We may be like this for the rest of our lives—I hope we will—so you’d better get used to it.”

Ron chuckled. “Give me a break, it’s all a bit much. I am happy for you, you know that. One thing I like about the new seating arrangements is that Ginny and Hermione are both out of hitting range of me. Ow!” he finished, as Hermione leaned around Harry and whacked him on the shoulder. “Okay, out of easy hitting range.” The others all laughed.

“Oh yeah, I was so involved, I didn’t even notice you’d moved around, until I saw this lovely face across from me.” Ginny blushed, and Ron struggled to keep a straight face.

“This is in deference to you and Ginny, of course,” Hermione explained. “As I’ve discovered with Neville, it’s better to sit across from your special person, so you can look lovingly at them more easily. I see you two have already picked up on

that.” She looked over at Ron to get his reaction to this, and seemed disappointed to see him looking undisturbed.

He saw this, and shrugged. “Sorry, Hermione, but I can see I’m massively outnumbered here, so I’m giving up. You four can snog away at the table for all I care, I’m not going to say a word. It’ll be too easy for you to have at me all the time otherwise.”

Harry looked up and saw Justin and Ernie approach. “Hi, guys. I’d forgotten, since there were three attempts on my life yesterday, you owe me two more visits.”

“I’m sure we’ll squeeze them in somehow,” said Justin. “Before you got here, Dumbledore showed us your new shield, and told us you Disapparated out of the Chamber when even he couldn’t have. I was just wondering if you were going to go shopping for a cape and tights later.”

Harry and Hermione chuckled. “Muggle reference,” she said to the others.

“No, it’s just me, mild-mannered Harry Potter,” joked Harry. “It’s amazing what you can do when you know you’ll die if you don’t. I just get a chance to find out a lot more than most people.”

Ernie shook his head. “No, Harry. Most people just die, if it happens to them. A lot did, fifteen years ago. Looks like the Killing Curse is one less thing you have to worry about.”

“That is a relief, that’s for sure,” agreed Harry.

“Seems safe to say that there won’t be a formal demonstration of this one,” commented Ernie.

Harry chuckled. “No, I don’t think Dumbledore would allow it. I guess the images are going to have to do. Did the images show it protecting Ginny too?”

“Yes, they did,” said Justin. “Oh, and by the way, congratulations, you two. It’s all over the tables now about you. I see you overcame your fears, Harry.”

“Turns out love was more powerful than I thought,” Harry said. “I’m still worried, but with this shield, maybe a bit less worried.”



“I would think so,” Justin agreed. “And that was a nice speech you gave about Pansy. Ernie and I are going to go up and see her before our first class, and I suspect we won’t be the only ones.”

“Thank you, both of you,” said Harry. “She deserves whatever support she gets.”

They nodded and walked off. Harry started in on his breakfast; he knew he would need most of the time left to finish it before his first class. He thought about Pansy, but also enjoyed the comradeship of his friends. He rejoiced in knowing that soon she would too, and not have to hide it.

Harry’s morning classes went well, except for the fact that some of his second years were again awestruck. He felt he could deal with it better this time, having experienced it before. He managed to loosen up both classes before they ended.

He and the others ate lunch quickly so they would have more time to go see Pansy. She was sitting up and finishing her lunch when they arrived. “Hi, everyone,” she said happily. They pulled up chairs, none of which were far from her bed, and sat.

She looked at Harry affectionately. “I can’t believe you did that, but I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. I’ve had about twenty or twenty-five visitors this morning, some of whom I barely know. A lot of them told me about your speech, and a few got details different from each other, but the idea came across well. They all wanted to wish me well, compliment what I did, give me their support, that sort of thing. It’s been really overwhelming; I’m so used to people looking at me as though I were scum that it’s hard to adjust. You knew this would happen when you gave that speech. This is what you wanted.”

“Pretty much. It’s nothing you don’t deserve, of course. I just wanted people to know the truth, which is what I told them.”

“I do want to take issue with one thing,” she said, looking more serious. “You said that you could never repay me for what I did, but you already have. Your love and friendship are the best things I’ve felt in my life. What you did this morning is just typical of you.

“By the way, Professor Dumbledore came by, a little after classes started. He stayed and talked to me for a while, longer than I expected. Maybe a half hour or so. We talked about the situation with Malfoy, and I told him what happened. He was very reassuring, he said he would make sure I was protected. He said—and I think this was kind of a joke, but it’s hard to tell—‘I could never look Harry in the eye again if I did not,’ meaning, protect me. He said that he was sure that no matter what he arranged, you would want to be a part of it.”

“Not only Harry, either,” said Ron, and the others nodded.

“Thank you, Ron,” she said. “All of you, I appreciate that. I’ve seen how well you protect Harry.”

“I’ll bet Madam Pomfrey hasn’t been happy with all your visitors,” said Harry.

“Professor Dumbledore told her while he was talking to me that I would need emotional support more than quiet bed rest, and suggested—it was an order, but he did it very politely—that I be allowed as many visitors as I got. She didn’t look happy, but she didn’t argue with him. I was happy, of course. Justin and Ernie were the first ones to come by, they were very nice.”

They talked for another fifteen minutes, after which the infirmary door opened, and the five Slytherin first year girls came in. They greeted Pansy and the Gryffindors, but couldn’t get too close to Pansy’s bed, as there were too many chairs nearby. They stayed back and waited their turn.

“Why not the boys, too?” asked Harry.

“We decided that ten at once was too many, so we flipped a Galleon to see who got to go first,” explained Augustina. “We won. They’ll be coming later.”

To Harry's surprise, Helen walked over to where Ginny was sitting. "Do you know how lucky you are?" asked Helen, as if there was a chance that Ginny might be taking having Harry for granted.

Ginny smiled. "I think that I'm the luckiest girl in the world, not to mention the happiest. If my happiness were energy, it could light up the whole world. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes. And we're happy for both of you. We still wish we were five years older so we could have had a chance, but we're still happy for you."

All of the older students laughed, even Harry. "Thank you," said Ginny fondly. "I can really understand why you would say that. Even for me, I felt like it was too much to hope for. It's a dream come true."

Harry shook his head. "Are you going to keep saying things like that that embarrass me for the rest of your life?"

"If you're lucky, she will," said Hermione pointedly.

"That was Hermione's way," he said to the first years, "of telling me that I should be happy that she feels that way and not be embarrassed."

"We should go, let them have a turn," suggested Hermione. "I'm sure that some of us will be in later when we get a chance." They said goodbye to Pansy and started to head out, but Harry stopped.

"I wanted to tell you," he said to the girls, "how proud I am of you—and Pansy, tell the boys I said this too—that you kept this secret all year long, and nobody found out. That's not easy to do, especially for ten people. Thank you for doing that."

"It wasn't that hard," said Augustina. "We like her, so we wanted to help her. We didn't end up being able to do much to help, but we wanted to."

"You did," said Pansy. "You gave me someone to talk to, I knew you cared about me. I really needed that. Now, sit down and tell me about his speech. Others have told me, but I like the story."

Everyone laughed, and Harry and the others left, Harry heading off to the staff room. He walked in and sat on the sofa next to John. John looked at him and said, "So, what's new, Harry?"

Harry pretended to consider the question. "Looks like I didn't need the blindfold or the cigarette after all, and managed to escape the firing squad."

"And get the girl in the process," John agreed. "Not a bad day's work. Oh, I heard Justin from the teacher's table. I was going to make the tights-and-cape joke."

"You're smart, John, you'll come up with others."

"We're all very pleased for you, Harry, that you got past your fears enough to decide to have a relationship," said Flitwick. "But I'd like to ask, did the fact that you can now fight off Avada Kedavra factor into your decision? Like it wasn't quite such a risk anymore, now that you can protect her?"

"No, it didn't enter my mind like that," answered Harry. "Tonks talked to me, helped give me the courage to do it. She convinced me that I'd be hurting Ginny more by not telling her than by putting her in danger. Ginny agreed."

"Hardly a surprise," commented Sprout.

"Professor," said McGonagall in her strict tone, "I suspect you are aware that we teachers know all about the places where student couples go to be alone."

This was greeted by some chuckles; Harry knew she was having fun with him, and he thought of a response. "Professor, I suspect that you yourself were sixteen once."

The teachers broke up laughing. It was the best response any comment of Harry's had ever gotten, probably, Harry thought, because it came at McGonagall's expense. McGonagall was smiling, and trying not to laugh. "I concede the possibility, but it was a very long time ago."

John smiled at Harry. "I've been told that you have an Invisibility Cloak, Harry. I have a feeling you're going to find a few new uses for it."

"Wow, you know, I hadn't thought of that," Harry admitted. "I haven't had time to really think this through."

“You would have figured it out sooner or later,” John said. “The teenage mind has great flexibility and creativity when it comes to this sort of thing.”

“Hermione’s already given us the rundown on the places, and some of you know the Weasleys came by last night. Molly made sure to mention them too. She told us which was her favorite when she was here.”

The teacher exchanged impressed looks. “I hope you took that for the compliment it was, Harry,” said McGonagall.

Harry nodded. “She was really, really happy. One nice thing about it being Ginny is that I don’t have to worry about in-laws, since I already think of them as parents anyway.”

“And your aunt and uncle don’t care?” Flitwick asked.

“My aunt and uncle would be happiest if they never saw or heard from me again,” Harry assured them.

“Why is that, Harry, if I may ask? I mean, you’re not such a bad person,” said Flitwick, with humorous understatement.

Harry chuckled. “Thank you, Professor. It’s not so much me they dislike as magic. They think it’s unnatural and strange, and want nothing to do with it. I’m just a reminder to them of the problem Professor Dumbledore dropped on their doorstep almost sixteen years ago. They’ve resented it all that time, and they took it out on me. Not being abusive, mind you, just making it clear in every way that I wasn’t wanted or welcomed.”

Sprout looked at him sympathetically. “There are those who would consider that a form of abuse,” she said. “Children need to know they’re cared about. To deliberately withhold that... it doesn’t say good things about them, to be sure.”

Harry couldn’t argue with that, so he said nothing. John said, “Oh, Harry, did you know that Hugo is coming? He might already be here, I’m not sure. Any guesses as to why he might be here?”

Harry kept a casual, deadpan expression. “Going to do an article on how incredibly brave Pansy has been all year, I hope.”

John nodded. “There might be a separate article about her, actually. It wouldn’t surprise me. The new shield will be the main article, of course, that and the three attempts on you in one day. He could easily do separate articles on Pansy and Ginny as well.”

Harry cringed. “Oh, please, not one on Ginny, not so soon. Can’t they wait until we’re married?”

A few teachers chuckled. “Sorry, Harry,” said John. “From their point of view, it’s irresistible. Just Harry Potter getting a girlfriend is big enough news. But Harry Potter, facing certain death, saves himself and the girl, and then is inspired by her love to unheard-of feats of magical ability, and falls in love... it’s way too good a story. May as well have it written by Hugo, and not somebody drawing on second- and third-hand accounts, which is what would otherwise happen.”

“Thank goodness for Hugo, anyway,” grumbled Harry. “From my other experiences with the press, I probably just wouldn’t talk to them, and I’d probably look pretty bad not doing it.” He paused. “Funny how I care about that now, I never used to. I guess I’m recognizing part of the grim reality of being Harry Potter, that I’ll have a public image whether I like it or not, and it’s better that it’s a good one.”

“Next thing, you’ll have to hire yourself a publicist,” joked John.

“Don’t say that,” said Harry fervently. “I get these images in my head, fearing I’ll end up like Lockhart, walking up to random people and offering them autographs.”

“Don’t worry, Harry,” said a chuckling Flitwick, “your friends would never let that happen.”

“That’s true. Thank goodness for them, too.”

“Another thing you should be aware of, Harry,” said McGonagall, looking serious, “is that he may also do an article questioning Professor Dumbledore’s decision to allow Malfoy and Crabbe back into Hogwarts after vacation. This morning, the headmaster received twenty owls from parents raising such questions,

after hearing of the explosion which could have killed a hundred or more students. Unfortunately, it is a legitimate question.”

“How can they criticize him for not doing something against the rules?” Harry asked.

“Professor Dumbledore runs Hogwarts the way he, and I, would like to see society run,” she explained. “Students have rights, and cannot be searched, disciplined, or expelled for arbitrary reasons, or based on suspicion. But the fact is that these are his rules and principles, not those of wizarding law. He could run this school any way he saw fit, and as long as he had political support, it would not be questioned by the Ministry. He could have expelled Crabbe and Malfoy if he had wished, and as their fathers are known Death Eaters, people would have applauded. That he did not do so is admirable, but also exposes him to criticism when things do not go well. Had the explosion in fact killed a hundred students, he would no doubt have been removed as headmaster by the governors, who would have been under intense pressure to do so. As disaster was narrowly averted, this will not happen, but he will have to answer questions, and his actions will be debated. You will certainly be asked about this, so it is better that you know in advance.”

Harry nodded, lost in thought. He supposed he could understand that, though he wished people would trust Dumbledore more. “Thanks for the warning, Professor,” he said. He found himself wishing for nothing more than to be with Ginny, to revel in love, and not have to think about things like this. Sometimes, he thought, it would be nice to be an ordinary teenager.

He got that chance, at least for a while, after Transfigurations. There was nothing specific he had to do, nor was there with Ginny, so they decided to try out the spot that Molly had recommended. They checked their maps to make sure no one else was already there, then walked out towards the lake, trying to be as casual as possible. They looked at the lake for a minute, and when it seemed like nobody

was looking in their direction, went behind the bushes. Harry felt extremely self-conscious, and told Ginny so.

“Don’t worry, I do too, a bit. Hermione said she did the first time as well, and she had to practically drag Neville, he was so nervous. Everybody knows that couples do this, it’s no big deal.”

“Yeah, but being Harry Potter, I always get noticed. I can’t help but wonder if this will too.”

“Relax, Harry,” said Ginny. “Remember when we kissed in the infirmary last night? What were you thinking then?”

“That I’d like to do it a lot more,” he remembered. “And you’re going to point out that now I can.”

She nodded and looked at him expectantly. He smiled, leaned in, and kissed her. A few seconds at first, the kisses got longer and longer. After a few minutes, they stopped to catch their breath. “Wow, that’s so good,” he said. “Kind of like being in love, I knew about it, but I had no idea it was as good as it is. It’s wonderful.”

“I understand that there are even better things to come,” she said, grinning.

“Yes, I heard that somewhere, too,” he replied, grinning as well. “But I’m happy to do this for now. We can try the other stuff when this gets boring,” he joked.

“I hope we don’t have to wait that long,” she joked back. “I don’t see this getting boring anytime soon.”

“Hermione really said she had to drag Neville here?” he asked.

“Just the first time,” she explained. “After that, he went very willingly.”

“I can definitely believe that,” he said, and leaned in again. After another few minutes, they came up for air. He felt his head was swimming.

“You know what’s best about this,” he said, “is that I love you so much.” Stopping to appreciate her expression in response, he then continued, “I mean, I could imagine that this would be nice even if you only sort of liked the person. But



there's a part to it that's more than just how it feels physically, if you know what I mean."

"I do know," she agreed. "Do you mind... I want to ask you something, but you don't have to answer if you don't want to... but how was it for you with Cho? I never heard you talk about that."

"It was nothing like this," he said. "I wasn't ready... I knew I liked her, but didn't know what to do. There was only one kiss, and she was crying, so it wasn't such a great experience. But even if she hadn't been, I'm sure it would have been nothing like this. When I kiss you, it feels like it means something."

"I'm so glad, Harry. I think that's what it's supposed to feel like when you're in love. You know... " She looked into his eyes, almost shyly. "I'm kind of embarrassed to admit this, but I will... I used to daydream about this. I'd sit there and imagine that you were in love with me, and kissing me, and stuff. I never thought it could happen, but it was nice to imagine. Part of me still can't believe that it happened, that you're in love with me. I didn't think people's dreams came true like this."

Let's hope it doesn't turn into a nightmare, he thought, then tried to squelch the thought immediately. He looked into her eyes again and sunk back into the feeling of love. "I'm so glad, Ginny. I'm glad I could make you this happy, like you've made me. So, what else happened in these daydreams?"

She raised her eyebrows and smiled, as if wondering whether or not he was teasing her. "I thought you were content to do this for now."

"I didn't mean that to be set in stone or anything. I just thought you might have a better imagination than me."

"I think you'll find that your imagination's just fine," she said, reaching for him. As they kissed again, he remembered Arthur's advice, to revel in this. He decided that he intended to do just that.

They stopped at a little after five o'clock; they had been there for almost an hour, and they both would have been happy to continue, but knew they would have to come back for dinner eventually anyway, and felt it had been long enough. As they walked around the lake on their way back, Harry said, "Did I mention that that was really, really good?" He knew that he had actually said it about five times or so; he just didn't have the words to say it much differently.

"I think you did," she said. Both were smiling; Harry felt as if he smiled quite a lot now, just because of Ginny. "Harry, I love you so much. I can't wait to do this again. But not only this, I just love being with you. Even when we're with the others, even if we can't touch each other, it's still wonderful. When I look into your eyes now... I've always liked your eyes, but now they're especially beautiful, because of what they say about me."

People had often commented on Harry's eyes, but never had the comments made him feel as good as that one, and he told her so. She put her arm around him and leaned into him. "I feel like I'm going to have to figure out a lot of different ways to say I love you, because otherwise, I'll just be repeating myself a lot," she said. He assured her that he didn't mind the repetition.

Harry saw Hugo Brantell about thirty yards away, walking towards them. "The teachers warned me that he'd be here today," he told Ginny. "They said he would write about you, too."

She shrugged. "I suppose that should bother me, but it doesn't right now. I don't think much could bother me right now."

"Well, he's just going to write the truth, which is as much as we can hope for," said Harry. Hugo got closer, and extended his hand. As he shook Harry's hand, then Ginny's, he smiled and said, "Well, the others told me as much, but it's nice to see it for myself."

"What?" Harry asked.

“Let’s put it this way, Harry. If there was a beacon shining from your eyes that spelled out the words ‘I’m in love,’ it wouldn’t be that much more obvious than it is now.” Turning to Ginny, he said, “Yours too, I should add.”

Ginny’s smile widened, and Harry couldn’t help but smile as well. “Isn’t this pretty common when people fall in love?” asked Harry.

“Yes, but yours is especially strong, from both of you. My special powers are telling me that this will be a long and happy relationship.”

“I would never argue with your special powers,” said Harry. “Especially when they agree with what I feel.”

“I want to thank you for not telling him,” said Ginny.

“Not telling me what?” asked Harry.

“She means that when I first interviewed her in September, it didn’t take long for me to realize that she was in love with you. Of course I never would have told you; people have to find out that kind of thing for themselves. But I don’t think I’d be violating any confidences if I told you that your friends are incredibly happy for you; they had hoped this would happen. Especially Ron.”

Harry blinked. “Really?”

“I thought that was the case,” said Ginny. “I mentioned the idea to him jokingly a few times, and he didn’t react negatively like he did anytime I mentioned any other boy I might be interested in. You know, Harry, you’re the first close friend he ever had, too. He feels a lot for you, even if he’d never say to you what you said to him in that card.”

Harry explained what he’d written in Ron’s birthday card, and Hugo laughed heartily. “I can be pretty sure, Harry, that while he may have been embarrassed, he was also very pleased.”

“I thought so, I hoped so,” said Harry. “I assume you’ve already talked to most everyone else you’re going to? That’s what you usually do, I think.”

Hugo nodded. “Not everyone, just a few more teachers, and Professor Dumbledore.” He stopped, took in Harry’s expression, and said, “Yes, I’m sorry,

but I have to do the article about him. I'd rather not, I assure you. You know how I admire him, and I respect what he did, even if I wouldn't do it myself. But the questions have to be raised and discussed, and better me than someone else. I'll put it in the proper context, while someone else might just make it seem like he was lazy and didn't care."

Harry sighed. "I can't argue with you, of course. The teachers warned me you'd be writing about that, and I actually said, thank goodness for Hugo, without him I'd probably never talk to the press at all."

Very pleased, Hugo smiled. "Thank you, Harry. I don't think I'd be compromising my journalistic integrity too much by telling you that I'm happy you feel that way. Reporters are supposed to be neutral and objective, but we're human, too. I think some journalists get so wrapped up in the story that they forget that people are involved."

"Rita Skeeter," Harry muttered.

"Say that name around Hermione, Hugo, and you'll get a lot of information without her even opening her mouth," said Ginny.

"Yeah, she did a job on Hermione, that's for sure," Hugo agreed. "But, you know, I did mention the name to her in September, and Hermione's main reaction was an almost smug satisfaction. She wouldn't say anything about it; my best guess is that she found out something about Rita that helped put her out of action for awhile."

"Hermione's pretty clever," said Ginny humorously.

"I'd tell you, but I think I'd be violating Hermione's confidence if I did," said Harry. "I doubt it's that important for you to know, anyway."

"True," agreed Hugo. "Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom okay?" They set out for the castle.

"Say, Hugo," asked Harry, "did you just happen to come out here at a good time, or—"

"I was with Ron," Hugo answered. "He was keeping an eye on the map, and he let me know when you moved. Don't worry, that won't make it into the article."

"If it did, Mum would be pleased to know we used her spot," joked Ginny.

"I see that she was happy about this," commented Hugo. "I'll be talking to your parents later on."

"I hope your deadline isn't tomorrow," said Ginny. "You'll never get Mum to shut up. She was walking on air when we told her."

"It's always nice to talk to happy people," said Hugo.

"Hugo, I just wondered... personally, how has the Apparation Restriction Act affected you?" asked Harry.

"You're trying to get a sense of public opinion by asking me, I see. The problem is, Harry, I understand the issues better than most people. Even if it inconvenienced me a lot, I wouldn't be bothered. But no, it's not a huge problem. I can take fireplaces to most places, and I'll take a broom if I need to. It doesn't affect me much. Most people feel like I do, in fact. But I will tell you that there's already starting to be rumblings in the Ministry about Ministry higher-ups and their benefactors trying to figure out how they can get special permission to Apparate for non-emergency reasons. You hadn't considered this possibility when you supported it; that's the problem with being sixteen years old and noble, Harry, you don't imagine how selfish people can be. Don't worry, if I get any solid information on this, I'll write about it. I may know enough about people to be a bit cynical, but I'm also disgusted by it."

"Just incredible..." Harry couldn't think of much more to say. They walked up the steps to the castle, and headed for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. In the hour before dinner, Hugo didn't get a chance to ask all the questions he wanted, so he came to dinner with Harry and the rest. He finished his questions, thanked them, and headed off to talk to more teachers.

Harry knew he had to get some homework done that evening—he hadn't had much time for it the previous evening—but he wanted to talk to Professor

Dumbledore first. He hadn't talked to him privately at any length about what had happened, and he wanted to know what Dumbledore thought. He headed toward Dumbledore's office, but received no answer when he knocked. He realized that Dumbledore might be in his quarters, so he decided to go there. He knocked, and the door opened. "Harry," said a pleased Dumbledore, getting up. "I was just finishing my dinner. Please come in, have a seat."

Harry sat in the chair he'd sat in when he had the dinner with Dumbledore before the term started. "Have you had a good day, Harry?" asked Dumbledore. This was not a usual question from him, so Harry assumed he was referring to how he felt about Ginny.

"Very good, sir," Harry answered. "It feels wonderful. I don't have to have experienced everything to know that there's nothing better than this. I still fear that something could happen—maybe even more than before, since now I know exactly what I could lose—but I don't regret that I did it. Now I just wish I had done it before."

"Things must happen in their own time, Harry," Dumbledore advised. "There are times we are not ready for things, and they must wait until we are. So, what would you like to discuss?"

"A few things, sir. First, I wanted to know what you thought about how what happened yesterday will affect any future encounters I have with Death Eaters, or Voldemort. Ron was saying he thought I might be able to take on Voldemort now, since I can defend against the Killing Curse. I didn't think so; I assume he's got lots of stuff that I don't know, and would find it hard to defend against. Is that right?"

"Unfortunately yes, Harry. I believe now that power for power, you could stand up to him. But, as you suggest, he is expert in all sorts of Dark magic, the defenses for which you do not yet know, and would take you a few years to learn. With enough time, you could defeat him in a head-to-head battle. But I fear that you will be called upon to face him sooner than that. Based on your performance in

crisis situations before, I am not pessimistic about how you would handle yourself. You will be able to stay calm and focused, I am sure. But I would say it is not something you should seek, not yet.

“As for the Death Eaters, yes, I believe that you could defeat most of them. Being able to block the Killing Curse gives you a tremendous advantage when you duel. Your shield will come on without your conscious thought should a deadly curse break through your defenses. Kingsley tells me that your dueling skills are coming along very well, and I believe that your falling in love will affect your other magical skills as it did your ability to Disapparate. As you refine your dueling skills further, even if your technical skills do not match theirs, your power may be greater, making you their equal. I shall greatly look forward to Kingsley’s next report.”

“Was that what you were talking to Cassandra and Tonks about last night?”

“Yes, among other things. They were awed that you could escape the Chamber, even more so than by your newest shield. They recognize that it suggests a large increase in your power, and wished to discuss its implications. For example, they suspect that next Saturday when you practice your anti-Disapparation field, none of them will be able to escape, and if that is the case, you could even do one that would trap Voldemort. And that would have substantial implications regarding the notions of a raid against Voldemort, should we get solid intelligence of his whereabouts.”

“Do you mean intelligence that wouldn’t compromise Professor Snape?”

“Yes, I should have clarified that. We cannot risk him until we know Voldemort can be defeated. Your power notwithstanding, I still do not know precisely how that will be accomplished. There is one thing I am certain of, Harry: if you defeat Voldemort, it will not be by using a Killing Curse. As your magic is based on the energy of love, I believe you would simply not be capable of it.”

“I’ve wondered about that too, sir,” Harry admitted. “How am I going to beat him, then? What can I do that would kill him?”

“You should recall, Harry, the exact wording of the prophecy. It did not use the word ‘kill,’ but the word ‘vanquish.’ I would speculate that you will find a way to ‘vanquish’ him without killing him, as such. Granted, the prophecy also says that one of you will die at the hands of the other, but the phrase is still not as direct as ‘kill,’ and prophecies can be fulfilled in unexpected ways which do not contradict the prophecy. I admit I cannot imagine how that would be done. But I believe the prophecy is accurate, and that a way will present itself when the time is right.”

“Hmmm... I guess I shouldn’t worry about that right now, then. Anyway, I also wanted to ask you what you have in mind for Pansy’s protection. She said you said you’d take care of it, and I know you will, but I feel personally responsible for it too. I’d like to have something to do with it.”

“I imagined you would, Harry. I have not yet decided on a final plan, but there are a number of things that could be done. I am sure that the Aurors would look favorably on a request to provide her special protection, for example. As for a location, I have yet to talk to Arthur and Molly, but I am thinking of the Burrow as a place she could stay for the summer. With a little effort, it could be made highly secure, and you could help in that effort.”

“That sounds great, sir. How could I help?”

“You could help in laying down an anti-Disapparation foundation on the grounds, much like the one here at Hogwarts, but reversible. If your ability to Disapparate out of the Chamber is any indication, the area you create would definitely disallow any Apparation by Death Eaters, and perhaps even Voldemort. Not that he would go on such a mission alone, of course. But you could be instrumental in ensuring the Burrow’s security.

“In addition to that, Pansy can be outfitted with jewelry similar to what your cousin has. She can wear what would essentially be a Malfoy detector. Professor Snape has acquired a few strands of his hair from his bed; they can be used to imbue a jewel to serve as an alarm if he gets within a certain distance. You, and I suspect, your friends, can be equipped with jewelry that will signal you when that



alarm sounds; you should be able to Apparate to her location within seconds in the unlikely event it should become necessary. If she resides at the Burrow and you all wear such devices—hers going off would alert Aurors as well, of course—she will be very secure.”

“So,” Harry said, “if that ends up being what we do, then it would make sense for me to spend the summer there, too, I assume. I mean, it would be almost as secure as Privet Drive is for me, and I was going to have to leave there soon anyway.” Harry hoped that Dumbledore wouldn’t contradict him. He knew he would do what Dumbledore suggested, but he wanted to be at the Burrow even more than he didn’t want to be at Privet Drive.

Dumbledore gave him a small smile, obviously having a clear understanding of Harry’s emotional state. “Yes, your new strength combined with the security in place will surely discourage any attempts on you while there. You need not go back to Privet Drive. It is a burden you have borne for too long as it is.”

Harry exhaled visibly, without having intended to. Thank goodness, he thought, never to have to go back there again. “It’s not only that, sir, it’s getting to spend the whole summer with Ginny... it’ll be the first time I ever looked forward to summer.”

Dumbledore nodded. “It will not be a relaxed summer, however. I have no doubt the Aurors will want you for training at least a few days a week.”

“That’s fine, sir, as much as they want,” he said. “Ginny knows that the stronger I get, the better I can protect both of us.”

“That is good, Harry. There is one other thing I wished to mention as far as Pansy’s protection goes. Measures will be taken which assume that Malfoy will energetically attempt to fulfill his threats. The fact is, however, that he will almost certainly not do so. Not because of a lack of desire to,” he quickly added, forestalling Harry’s objection, “but because he will not be authorized to. It will not surprise you to learn that he will be fully indoctrinated as a Death Eater very shortly. Once he is, the chances of his pursuing any sort of personal vengeance are

reduced to near zero. For Death Eaters, obedience to Voldemort is primary, and he does not allow them to engage in any operations without his instructions. Even if Malfoy were to ask for permission, which is highly unlikely, Voldemort would almost certainly refuse, because Pansy is of no strategic importance. So while Malfoy undoubtedly meant what he said to Pansy when he said it, he did not realize that he would not be allowed to follow through.”

“I’m very glad to hear that, sir. I would still think the protection was essential, of course, since we can’t know for a fact that it won’t happen. But that is good. Did you tell Pansy that when you talked to her this morning?”

“No, Harry, I did not. After suffering what she did, she did not need to be told that he would not follow through on his threat. She needed to be told that she would be safe even if he did. I would have eventually, just not right then. You may tell her if you wish.”

“Thank you, sir, I will. I’ll emphasize that there will still be strong protection, of course.” They talked for a little longer, and Harry was going to get up to leave, but stopped. “One other thing, sir. Nothing important, but over the past few weeks, I’ve had a few dreams about the Veil of Mystery. Not Voldemort dreams, of course, I would have let you know, but they didn’t seem like regular dreams either. Not much happens in the dreams; it’s just that archway, sitting there. Not even calling to me, which it seems like it should. But it reminded me, has anything happened with that thing from my dream before the term started, that Legion of Doom thing?”

“‘Legion of the Dead,’ Harry,” Dumbledore corrected him. “Nothing specific, no. And as for the dreams, it is not surprising that it should appear, as it is a compelling structure. We sometimes go through periods in which our dreams focus on one thing or another. It is understandable that you would take it seriously, given your other experiences with dreams. But unless something more happens in these dreams, I would not worry about it.”

Harry thanked Dumbledore and left, heading back to the Gryffindor common room. On the way, he had an idea for a test to see if his magic's power had really changed. Entering the common room, he found Hermione, Neville, and Ginny studying together. "Where's Ron?" he asked. Hermione smiled and raised her eyebrows a bit. "Oh, with Pansy," he said. Now the others smiled too; Harry could see that she was right in saying that the others would try to push them together, or at least want to. Harry did not plan to do that at all, fearing it could be counterproductive. He exchanged a loving look and smile with Ginny, then said, "Neville, could we have a few duels?"

"Sure," said Neville, getting up.

As they took their positions, Hermione joked to Ginny, "Oh, how I hate it when our men fight like this." Ginny chuckled.

What Harry had thought might happen did happen; he demolished Neville, taking all five bouts in times ranging from ten to thirty seconds. Harry and an amazed Neville sat back down with the girls. "When we started training with the Aurors, Harry and I were evenly matched," said Neville to Ginny and Hermione. "Over the past few months, Harry had started to get better than me, I'd only win a quarter or a third of our bouts. But now, all of a sudden I can't touch him, I was lucky to last thirty seconds once. It's not that his tactics are any better, but he's just overpowering. Even if I don't make any mistakes, I still lose. I have to think it's because he's in love."

Harry nodded. "I told you last night what Dumbledore thought about my Disapparating out of the Chamber, and I wanted to find out if it applied to the rest of my magic. It seems that it does."

Neville shook his head in amazement. "I've lasted up to nearly a minute in my best bout against an Auror, and I could barely do thirty seconds against Harry. He's going to be a match for them in dueling, he'll definitely beat at least some. It's pretty incredible."

“It’s funny, I don’t even really care that much,” he said. “I mean, it’s nice, and I’m sure it’ll be helpful, but for now, I have more important things on my mind.” He looked at Ginny during the last part of the sentence. He got out his books and joined them in doing homework. Sitting next to Ginny, even that felt much better than usual.

Harry and the others headed down to breakfast the next morning at their usual time. They were still in the mode of protecting him, though they knew that any attempt on him was now highly unlikely, and they were at nowhere near as high a state of readiness as they had been on Monday.

They took their now-usual seats, and as they did, the morning owls came in with the mail. Copies of the Prophet dropped in front of Harry, Hermione, and Ginny, who picked hers up slowly. “I guess this is because there’s an article about me,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry sincerely. “I’m afraid it comes with the territory.”

“It’s worth it, it’s really good territory,” she said, opening the paper. Harry and Hermione did as well, Harry sharing his with Ron, as Ginny did with Neville. They slowly ate as they read. “Wow, four Hogwarts-related articles,” said Neville. “The main one, about the attempts on Harry and the new spell, then one on Pansy, a smaller one on Ginny, and one on Professor Dumbledore not expelling Malfoy and Crabbe.”

“How in the world did he write four articles in one night?” wondered Harry aloud. “I know he said he wrote fast, but still...”

Hermione read aloud from the Dumbledore article. “‘While admitting that he would have expelled Malfoy and Crabbe had he been in the same position, Professor Potter nonetheless offered a spirited defense of his headmaster’s actions...’ There’s a long quote from you, I see you told the Hagrid story, that’s good, it illustrates your point pretty well... wow, Pansy defends him too, I didn’t know that. ‘Asked how she felt about Professor Dumbledore’s actions, Miss

Parkinson said, “He’s the headmaster, he has to do what he thinks is best. I don’t have the knowledge or experience to criticize him. And I refuse to blame anyone for what happened to me other than Malfoy. Also, I knew what I was doing when I got into this. I knew there was a risk, and I took it.” That’s very good of her, considering what happened.”

“Yes, I’d say so,” Harry agreed. He thought he heard Ron make a noise that sounded like a grunt. “What?” he asked Ron.

“Nothing,” responded Ron, with just enough discomfort to suggest to Harry that Ron wasn’t being truthful.

Normally Harry wouldn’t pursue the question, as he preferred not to try to make Ron talk when he didn’t want to. But on this occasion, Harry felt compelled to know what Ron meant. Instead of pressing Ron, he decided to try to guess what Ron was referring to. “Do you think she’s being too nice to Dumbledore?”

The ‘can we not talk about this?’ look on Ron’s face told Harry he was right; Harry raised his eyebrows in response. Clearly deciding he’d been found out, Ron sighed, then spoke. “I didn’t want to say anything, because I know how you feel about Dumbledore. And I understand the principle, and I know it makes sense. At least in theory. But... you saw it, you know how bad it was. That’s going to be with her for a long time. And the worst thing is, I think in a way she feels like she deserved it. Not for what she did to Malfoy, of course, but for all the stuff she did before.”

It looked to Harry as though Ron was angry, but trying to control his feelings. “That’s ridiculous, of course, and I told her that last night, when we talked about it,” Ron continued. “I mean, okay, she was mean and nasty. She enjoyed hurting people that she and Malfoy didn’t like. But that’s just a... a huge difference from the Cruciatu Curse, never mind for that long a time. You just can’t compare them, it’s like saying someone deserves to be killed for stealing a few Galleons. But I think she won’t blame anyone else because she’s too busy feeling like she deserved

it, but that's just wrong. She didn't deserve it, and she doesn't deserve to feel like she does."

There was silence for a moment; no one was reading the newspaper. "I don't think anyone here will argue with you about that, Ron," said Hermione, her expression somber. "I would say the same thing to her that you said. But we really can't know what it feels like for her."

Neville spoke. "Is it like, you don't want her to blame herself, so you blame Dumbledore?"

Ron grimaced slightly and hesitated, suggesting that while he didn't want to say it that way exactly, Neville wasn't too far off. "I blame Malfoy first, obviously," Ron clarified, with a glance at Harry. "But none of us would have done what Dumbledore did; he could have prevented this. Not only this, but you and Ginny almost died, would have if not for this energy-of-love thing you have going. If you had died, I don't think I'd be sitting here saying, 'well, at least Dumbledore did what he thought was right, gotta give him credit for that.' I'd be wishing someone else had been headmaster. Yes, I know the Hagrid story, I was there when they took him away. But I'd bet if you asked Hagrid about the trade-off—he has to spend a week in Azkaban, and in return, Crabbe and Malfoy aren't allowed back in—he'd take that trade. I know Dumbledore's reasons, Harry. But it's too extreme. I can't sacrifice people on principle, and I can't approve of it. If you could've stopped something, and you don't, you do have responsibility."

There was another silence, as Harry struggled with what Ron had said. He still wasn't inclined to blame Dumbledore, since he knew better than anyone how heavily the consequences of his actions weighed on Dumbledore, but he didn't feel he could argue with Ron, either. "He would be the first to agree, with that last sentence," said Harry. "I'm sure he feels responsible for what happened to Pansy, what almost happened to us. I just..." He trailed off, feeling uncomfortable saying anything that opposed Ron or Dumbledore.

Ron seemed to understand. “Don’t worry about it. I wasn’t going to say anything, this is only because you asked me.”

Harry nodded in acknowledgment, and told himself that from then on, if Ron didn’t want to talk about something, he wouldn’t encourage him to. They all went back to reading their newspapers. Harry started on the article about Ginny, which was shorter than the rest. After a few minutes of reading, he looked to his left. “Hermione, what does ‘vivacious’ mean?”

“‘Spirited’ or ‘lively,’” she answered, distracted, as she read.

“Well, that sounds right,” said Harry. “He could just say that, though.”

“I would explain to you why that word is better than the others, Harry, but I’m reading right now. Ask me later, I’ll tell you.” Harry looked at Ron, and they both smiled, knowing that Harry would not ask. Not having moved her head from the paper, Hermione continued, “Don’t think I don’t know what you two just did. You’re so predictable...” Now Harry and Ron exchanged a less pleased look as Ginny and Neville chuckled.

Reading the article about Ginny, Harry said, “It’s not as bad as I expected. Lots of nice things about Ginny, which is good.” To her, he continued, “Mentions the Chamber from four years ago, I should have expected that. Molly is described as ‘deliriously happy,’ guess we knew that. Flattering quotes from classmates...” Harry’s mouth dropped open in surprise, and he looked at Ron, who already looked embarrassed. “Thank you, Ron. I’m very touched.” Ron nodded, but didn’t say anything.

“What did he say, Harry?” asked Neville. “Ginny’s on a different page.”

“Of course, I’m really happy. They’re both great people, and they’ll be really good for each other. I couldn’t have wanted any better for either of them.” He looked at Ron again, with gratitude; Ginny did as well. “Oh, that’s so sweet, Ron,” said Hermione, reaching around Harry to squeeze Ron’s shoulder; Harry moved forward so she could reach more easily.

“I didn’t really say that, Hugo just looked at my face and figured it out,” joked Ron.

“Even if that were true, I’d still think it was really nice,” replied Ginny. “Thank you.”

They read and ate in silence for a few minutes. Hermione said, “Okay, I’ve finished all four articles, and—“

”That was fast, I’m still on the second,” commented Ron.

“I read fast, Ron, how do you think I do all that reading for classes? Anyway, there’s a very interesting omission: nowhere in these articles does it mention what we all assume to be the reason for the increase in Harry’s power, nor does it ever say specifically that there was a sudden increase. From reading this, you’d assume that Harry always had the ability to Disapparate out of Hogwarts.”

“Why did he do that?” asked Neville.

“Thank you, Hugo...” Harry said to himself, realization dawning. To Ginny and Neville, he said, “Dumbledore must have persuaded him to do this; he must want to keep it a secret that this is why I got stronger.”

“But wouldn’t he want everyone to know what love can do?” wondered Neville.

“Yes, he would, Neville, but not until Voldemort and his people are dealt with,” explained Hermione. “Dumbledore’s being cautious. He’s concerned that if Death Eaters know that Ginny is responsible...” She trailed off, looking at Ginny sadly.

“...they’ll think about getting rid of Harry’s power source,” finished Ginny, looking both frightened and determined. “I don’t care, Harry,” she said. “I knew what I was getting into, never more than when I thought we were going to die in the Chamber. Besides, I know you. You won’t let anything happen to me.”

“No, I won’t,” he said quietly. “Besides, it’s not going to happen like that anyway, since Dumbledore did make sure that didn’t make its way into print. Funny thing is, it probably wouldn’t have mattered anyway—Voldemort wouldn’t take it



seriously, he'd assume it was just some stupid invention of the press. Since he has contempt for love, he'd never believe it could be a source of power. But it was still very smart of Dumbledore to do that. I hadn't thought of it."

He was going to say something else, but stopped when he heard applause start, and slowly swell. He looked around, and saw Pansy near the entrance to the Hall. He immediately jumped up off his seat and ran toward her, the others close behind him. She took a few steps towards him, smiling. He reached her and hugged her tightly. Then he stepped aside for Hermione, who hugged Pansy next, after which the other three did too, to sustained applause. They walked back to their seats, taking Pansy along with them, as the applause died down. They had Pansy sit down opposite Ron; Harry could see that she had tears in her eyes.

"I've never been applauded before," she said, accepting a tissue from Hermione. "You know, Harry, when you were having the Voldemort dreams, you said a few times how much it helped you that the school supported you. I think I know what you mean now. All those visitors yesterday, and now that... it feels so good to know that people appreciate what I did. And thank you again for telling them."

He shook his head. "It was so little compared to what you did. I'm just happy that now we get to be your friends is public, no more hiding and looking at maps."

"Yes, now you'll be looking at maps for different reasons," she teased him. The others chuckled.

Pretending to be annoyed, he said, "All right, who told her?"

She rolled her eyes fleetingly. "Nobody had to tell me, Harry, come on. Of course you're going to go to the places for couples, and of course you'd use the map. Hermione told me how she used it for that."

"Really," said Neville, as though what she had said was only mildly interesting. "What else did she tell you?"

Pansy smiled. “Wow, Neville, I’m impressed that you’re not embarrassed for me to say that kind of thing at the table. Let’s see, she said—“

”That’s okay, forget I mentioned it,” said Neville quickly, to general laughter. Hermione laughed especially hard, then said, “Pansy, it’s very good to have you at the table.” She looked up, and got up from her seat and walked to the teachers’ table.

“What’d she do that for?” asked Neville.

“I think McGonagall motioned her over there,” said Ron. “That’s pretty unusual.”

“I think I know why,” said Pansy glumly. “It’s against the rules to sit at any table except your house’s.”

“You really don’t think she’s going to be like that, do you?” Ron asked.

“It would seem a bit strict, but you know McGonagall,” said Ginny.

Hermione sat back down, looking happy. “She said she wanted to tell me about a new rule. Apparently, prefects are allowed to sit wherever they want.”

Pansy looked over at McGonagall, who was talking to the teacher next to her. “She’s not looking at you on purpose,” Harry advised her. “She doesn’t want to acknowledge doing something nice. I’ll tell her in the staff room later that you appreciated it.”

Hermione handed her copy of the Prophet to Ginny, who gave it to Pansy. “Here, read that while you eat,” said Hermione. “There’s a good article in there.” The paper she had handed over was opened to the article on Pansy.

Three days later, Harry had his first Auror training session since Monday’s events, but it was as much testing as training; the Aurors were trying to determine the extent of Harry’s current magical power. Dueling yielded much the results that Neville had predicted; Harry beat some Aurors more than they beat him, and some could beat him more than he could beat them. Even those said they felt that their

superior skill and experience was all that allowed them to beat him, and were sure that once his skills matched theirs, they would rarely or never defeat him.

Apparation testing yielded similarly impressive results. Kingsley and Dawlish were considered to be the two strongest Aurors, but even they could not escape his anti-Disapparation field. Dumbledore was summoned, and to the astonishment of the Aurors, and Harry himself, Dumbledore could not escape the field either. Then he put a field onto Harry, who escaped it. Harry then had several practice duels with Dumbledore, who defeated him soundly and repeatedly. Dumbledore expressed to him and the Aurors what Harry had assumed: that he was strongest when it was a question of sheer power, but in matters where skill and experience were important, he was still some time away from reaching his ultimate potential. Still, everyone was amazed at the change.

Harry spent some time talking about his newest spell, what little he felt he could tell them. Dumbledore, for the Aurors' benefit, asked Harry some questions about his focus on love and how he went about channeling that into his magic. Harry felt that he was not quite sure himself, but he talked as much as he could about what he was thinking and feeling at the time he believed he started doing it. Dumbledore then gave the Aurors some advice about how to reach the state of mind that he and Harry did, with the idea that eventually they could do the same thing, and so use Harry's new spells. Dumbledore's talk to the Aurors gave Harry an idea.

At dinner at Hogwarts later that evening, Harry told his friends that he wanted to talk to them in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom after dinner. They headed off there together after they were finished eating. To the others' amusement, Harry showed off a bit by simultaneously moving fourteen desks off to the sides of the room, then moving the remaining desks into a circle, all six at once. They sat down. He had already told them at dinner about the results of the informal testing; now, he told them what had happened later, the talk that Dumbledore had given the Aurors.

“So, this is what I want to talk to you about, see what you think. From what happened to me last week, it’s easy to see that there’s huge potential for wizards to become stronger by using the energy of love in their spells. Now, the big question is, is this something that anybody could do with the right kind of training and practice, or is it something that only a very few wizards, like Dumbledore or me, could do? I have no idea, but I’d really like to find out.

“When Professor Dumbledore was talking to the Aurors, it occurred to me that I have a unique opportunity. I’m the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. If I thought this could work, I could teach it in my classes—“

Hermione couldn’t restrain herself from interrupting. “Oh, that would be wonderful! I hadn’t thought of that. You could teach a whole generation to use the energy of love! It could be a revolution in how wizards use magic!”

Harry couldn’t help but smile at her enthusiasm. “Well, that would be the ideal, but I definitely don’t know if it could happen. The thing is, like I said, I don’t know if it’s the case that it can be taught like that, and I don’t want to spend a lot of class time on something that I don’t even know will work or not. So, before I even try that, I want to find out. That’s why I wanted to talk to you.”

As usual, Hermione was the first to figure it out. “You want to see if you can teach us...”

He nodded. “I have to try to teach someone before I’ll try it in my classes. You’re the ideal people to try to teach, for more than one reason. The six of us are very close, and that’s very helpful to start with. We can have a very comfortable atmosphere from the beginning. Now, the thing about this that’s hard, but would be less hard for us, I think, is being comfortable being really open and talking about this sort of thing. I’m sure you remember that it was hard for me at first, but I had the motivation of desperately needing to deal with Voldemort to push me along. You don’t have that, and I don’t want to feel like I’m pushing anyone to do anything they’re not comfortable with, or wouldn’t want to invest the time and effort in something that might not work. So—“

”Harry,” said Ron, “sorry to interrupt, but I think we all know you’re talking mostly about me here. I know, I know, not only me, you mentioned the effort and everything, and that could apply to anyone. But I’m the only one who the bit about being comfortable applies to.”

“Not necessarily, Ron,” Pansy put in. “I’ve never really been that kind of person myself. I’ve gotten that way somewhat this year, because Harry, and then the rest of you, have been so good to me. But it still doesn’t come naturally to me. I think that Hermione, Ginny, and Neville are more like that naturally.”

Ron nodded his understanding. “Okay, but I still think Harry knew he was pretty much talking about me. And I can’t pretend it’s going to be totally easy for me. But I really want to do this, and I’ll do my best to put aside my... being reserved. Partly because it could make me stronger, but more to help Harry, and because I don’t want the other five of you doing something like this without me. I...” Ron took a breath, then continued. “I feel very close to all of you, and if you do this, I want to do it with you.”

“Thank you, Ron,” said Hermione.

“We appreciate it,” agreed Harry, understanding that saying something that was difficult for him to say was Ron’s way of saying he was serious about it. “But just to be sure before I continue... all the rest of you do want to do this?”

The other four nodded. “Of course,” said Pansy.

“I’m glad, thank you,” said Harry. “I’m not saying that we’re constantly going to be saying how much we love each other, or something like that. Honestly, I don’t know what’ll be involved. I’m just going to feel my way through it, and maybe you can help me. It was just that in my case, I found it was necessary to say things like that, that were hard to say, or even think things. For example, back in August and September, Professor Dumbledore advised me to think of love as feelings of closeness and friendship, and focus on those feelings. So I had to think about who those feelings were associated with, and the answer was obviously Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. With Ginny and Hermione, it was easy, because they’re girls. But I kind

of had trouble at first including Ron with that, because he's male, and it's awkward to think like that. And then later on, it was awkward to say it in front of him, but I felt like I had to, that I had to do it full out or it wouldn't work, so I did. I'm just saying, I don't know how this will work, but there could be that kind of situation."

"It's hard to argue with the results you've had, Harry," said Neville. "Now, we know that it's possible that this could be useful for increasing magical power only with you. But I would do this anyway. You had to do this to survive, and it's changed you. Even before you and Ginny, we saw that it made you a happier person, more relaxed. That's a good goal in itself." The others nodded in agreement.

"Right, okay," said Harry. "Well, first I'll talk in as much detail as I can about what was happening in my mind when I started doing this, and how things changed as I made progress. And sometimes we should stop and pause, and try to get that feeling going in our minds, and talk about how we feel or if we're having problems. And we'll see how it goes from there. Of course, anybody should interrupt if they have a question or a comment. Here goes..."

Harry started talking, and found it got easier as he went along. In what seemed like very little time, two hours had passed, and they had to go back to their common rooms. Harry didn't have any idea whether it would work or not, but it felt like a good start, and that he and the others would be happy to do it. For the time being, that was enough.

## CHAPTER 21

# REBORN FROM THE ASHES

As April turned into May, Harry was as busy as he had ever been at Hogwarts, but happier as well. He tried very hard to make sure he got at least an hour a day with Ginny, and tried to base the rest of his activities around that. There was more Quidditch practice as well, as the last match was coming up soon. He also tried to make sure that there were at least two sessions a week of his attempt to teach the others how to use the energy of love in their magic. So far, there were no concrete results, other than a greater sense of contentment after the sessions.

Harry was also happy because he no longer had to hide his friendship with Pansy. Now he felt it unfortunate that he had no classes with Slytherins, but he had a chance to talk to her at meals; she had developed a habit of eating her food with other Slytherins, then joining Harry and his friends after she was finished eating. There was a Hogsmead day in late April that passed uneventfully, and the five Gryffindors were pleased to be able to spend it with her openly.

At Dumbledore's suggestion, Harry started to have occasional dueling sessions with a surprising sparring partner: Professor Snape. It was Dumbledore's feeling that it would be helpful for Harry to practice against someone who could represent how a Death Eater would fight against him. To illustrate the point, Dumbledore first asked Snape to have five bouts with Harry using no particular Dark magic, only the sort of things Harry was learning from the Aurors. Under those conditions, Harry won four out of five hard-fought bouts. In another five bouts, with Snape using Dark magic, Snape won all five. Harry definitely wanted to learn how to deal with Dark magic while dueling, so he was happy to have the sessions, even if they were less pleasant than his Auror sessions.

There were no Death Eater attacks for three weeks after the Apparation Restriction Act went into effect, after which there was an attack on Muggles by Death Eaters who had apparently used brooms to reach the scene. Even so, it represented a decrease in the frequency of attacks, which Harry was quite happy about.

In early May, Harry decided to spend a little gold, and bought two somewhat expensive books. One was a compendium of advanced Dark magic that Harry wanted as a reference book. He knew the school library had it, but he wanted his own copy. He looked through it sometimes, wondering which sorts of things he would be most likely to run into from Voldemort. It had a section on dueling that Harry found particularly interesting. The other book was the definitive book on phoenixes, titled 'Reborn From the Ashes,' the book from which Hagrid had taken the quote. He had tried to check it out from the library, but it always seemed to be checked out already. After trying three times, he decided to just get his own copy. Since he was a phoenix companion, he reasoned, he should have his own copy anyway. The phoenix book cost ten Galleons, and the Dark magic one, thirty-five. He wondered if they were so expensive because there were so few wizards to sell books to that they had to charge more to make it worth writing a book. The phoenix book was much more pleasant reading, but he tried to read them equally often, as the other one could be highly useful.

The third Saturday of May was a typical Saturday for Harry. He and Neville had eight hours of Auror training, though sometimes not together; Harry's power was so far beyond Neville's that sometimes it was deemed appropriate to separate them so that each could work at his own ability level. Sometimes Harry was taught spells which could not be learned unless the wizard was sufficiently powerful; for example, he was taught how to cast the wide-field calming spell that he had seen the Aurors use after the department store attack. It was a spell commonly used by Aurors, but very difficult to cast, as was any spell which had an area effect. They also started working with him on spells that blocked hostile area-effect spells.



At lunch the conversation turned to politics, as Harry was finding it did more and more recently; he wondered if that was just natural for Aurors, or if they considered it another part of his education. It wasn't his favorite topic, but he knew that he would have to learn it, so he reluctantly paid attention and applied himself. He knew that it had consequences; for example, politics were what had foisted Dolores Umbridge onto Hogwarts last year, and they had all suffered greatly as a result of that. He didn't doubt Dumbledore's political astuteness, but if even Dumbledore could be outmaneuvered, Harry knew he had a lot to learn.

"How's it going with the ARA violators?" Harry asked halfway through lunch. "It's been a month and a half since it started, so I'd assume people know by now?"

"Mostly," agreed Teddy Wirshire. "We still get one or two a week who don't know, but it's been so long now, we can't just let them off with warnings. We have to take them in for processing."

"That reminds me, I never thought to ask, what's the penalty for violating the act?"

"That subject was debated a bit, I'm surprised you didn't read about it in the Prophet," commented Cassandra.

"I don't really read the Prophet," replied Harry. "I'd much rather talk to Ginny and the others over breakfast than read the paper, and I'm not that interested in it anyway."

"That's understandable, Harry, but you really should read it," suggested Kingsley. "Even if you weren't Harry Potter, it's better to read it, because the more informed we all are, the stronger a society we are. We can't be a part of the political debate if we aren't informed. Also, remember during the debate on the ARA, you were worried that it would start to lead to other, worse things. Well, if those kind of things start to bubble up, the Prophet is where you'll read about it. If you don't, they could happen before you know it, before they can be stopped."

"Well, Kingsley, he's only sixteen—" started Tonks.

“I know, I was just speaking generally,” replied Kingsley. “But what I said is the case especially for you, being Harry Potter. Not knowing what’s going on could make you weaker politically, or easier to manipulate. It’s not that strong a concern right now, because you have us, and Dumbledore, looking out for your interests. If something was going on that we knew would concern you, we would tell you. But my point is that’s not something you should count on. I know you’re only sixteen, you’re extremely busy and in love, and the paper can be boring. I’m not saying you have to take out a subscription tomorrow. Just something to keep in mind.” He gave Harry a small smile. “End of lecture.”

Harry chuckled. “I see your point. I’d never thought of it that way, of course. I guess I rely on other people too much for that, especially Hermione. Sometimes she reads me stuff from the paper that she thinks I should know. I have to admit I’m not that interested, and she can probably guess that. She hasn’t done it that much lately.”

“She knows, Harry,” confirmed Neville. “I’m sitting across from her, I see her face. She reads you something, and you kind of listen politely and everything, but don’t comment or ask questions, and I see her get annoyed sometimes. I think she doesn’t say anything because it wasn’t like you asked her to read it to you.”

“I should apologize to her and ask her to keep doing it,” said Harry. “I appreciate that she’s trying to help me. I guess I take her for granted a bit too much sometimes.”

“Yes, she thinks so too,” agreed Neville, to a few smiles around the table. “Not that she massively complains about it, but she’s said that it’s always annoyed her a bit about you and Ron that you always sort of assume that she’ll be there for help with homework and stuff like that. She doesn’t mind doing it, of course, and she’s not going to stop, but she’d like a little more appreciation, I guess.”

“Hmmm, guess I should mention that too. Maybe I should try to do everything at once. Is there anything else you know of that she’s not happy with me about?” Now the Aurors chuckled.

Neville thought. “No, not really. It’s not that big a deal, Harry. You know how she feels about you, she’d forgive you much worse than that. These are just little things. But I know she’d appreciate it if you did talk to her about them.”

“How is it going, Neville?” asked Tonks. “With you and her?”

Harry wondered if Neville would be comfortable answering the question in front of ten people, but the Aurors were very fond of Neville, which he assumed Neville knew. “Very well,” Neville answered. “We’re really happy. I don’t get to spend as much time with her as I’d like, she studies so hard, she’s always got things to do. Of course I study with her, and that’s nice, but I’m looking forward to the summer.”

“Have you had any fights, or arguments?”

“A few, but I wouldn’t say ‘fights,’ it’s not like there was yelling or anything. It’s hard to get privacy at Hogwarts anyway. Thank goodness Harry’s the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, sometimes we go to his classroom or office if we need to talk privately. We can’t exactly have an argument in the common room. But there have been a few things, which turned out to be my fault,” he said, grinning ruefully as the others chuckled. “They weren’t serious, but at the time, I thought they were. It’s taken me some time to get used to the idea that I’m not in danger of her breaking up with me every time she’s upset with me about something. And she got upset with me for thinking that, because it seemed to her like I don’t take it seriously when she tells me how much she loves me, which she does a lot. So we’ve been through that a bit. But mostly it’s going very well, and we’re happy. Harry, I don’t suppose that’s a problem that you have, worrying that Ginny’ll break up with you.”

“No, I guess I haven’t thought that much about it,” Harry agreed. “I guess I have too many other things to worry about. But she’s said she’s worried about it at times, even though there’s really no reason, it’s not like we even had a fight or anything. I tell her it’ll never happen, and she believes me, but I still think she worries.”

“It’s natural that she would, Harry, believe me,” said Tonks. “We all have our insecure moments, sometimes we worry that someone better could come along and take our person away from us. And look who she has—someone who could attract virtually any girl near his age he wanted. She’ll worry that you’ll run across some girl who’s beautiful and accomplished, see what you could have had, and dismiss her as a childish fling. Of course that’s not going to happen,” she said quickly, noting Harry’s expression. “I’m just saying, in her insecure moments, she will think that. It almost has to happen.” The other female Aurors nodded in agreement.

“What can I do to make sure she knows that won’t happen?”

Cassandra shook her head sadly. “Nothing, Harry. You can tell her until you’re blue in the face, and she’ll know you mean it, but she’ll worry that your feelings could change, and you wouldn’t know it now. She’ll think, it could happen, we never know what will happen in the future. Reassuring her often, and not getting annoyed when she expresses insecurity, will help. Time will fix this; the more time goes by, the more she’ll get used to the idea that you’ll always be together. Getting married wouldn’t hurt, either.”

Harry smiled. “What’s a common age to get married, for wizards?”

“Wizards tend to get married younger than Muggles, we’re not sure why,” explained Cassandra. “I think the average age is about twenty or twenty-one. You can get married as young as seventeen, but it’s kind of rare. At seventeen you’re still at Hogwarts, and people like to wait until they’re more free than that.”

Harry considered this. “So, the earliest I can reasonably marry her is... I guess in a little over two years...”

“Planning it all out, are you?” asked a grinning Tonks. Neville’s eyebrows were raised in surprise.

“All I know is that I want to be with her for the rest of my life, and I know that’s what she wants too,” Harry replied. “So I don’t see any reason to do it later instead of sooner.”

Now all the Aurors were grinning. “Romantic, yet practical,” commented Tonks.

“Most people wait a bit, Harry, because they want to be sure. You’re that sure?” asked Teddy. “I mean, you’ve only been together for a month and a half.”

“Don’t discourage him!” stage-whispered Tonks.

“But I’ve known her for a lot longer,” Harry pointed out. “I’ve always really liked her, and I know what kind of person she is. And I know how I feel about her. If we have any problems, we’ll deal with them. I don’t see what more there is to think about, especially since we can’t do anything for two years anyway. That ought to be plenty of time.”

“Well, we think it’s wonderful that you feel that way, Harry,” said Tonks, looking at Teddy as if to demand that he say nothing more that was discouraging.

“But really, I think there’s a lot to what Harry says,” said Cassandra. “If you love the person and are determined, that counts for a lot. Things that could break up other couples won’t break you up if you try hard. I think one thing we’ve noticed about Harry is that he doesn’t give up.”

“I’d give what she says a lot of weight, Harry,” said Tonks. “She is that rare creature, a happily married Auror.”

Harry could think of nothing more to say on the topic, so he didn’t. Changing the subject, Teddy said, “I never did answer your question, Harry, about the penalty for unauthorized Apparation.” Harry had forgotten that he’d asked. “For the first offense, it’s a three-month suspension of one’s Apparation license. For the second offense, it’s a one-year suspension and two weeks’ imprisonment. After that, it’s a year’s imprisonment. But people can get their sentences mitigated or struck if they choose to take Veritaserum and be questioned. If they genuinely didn’t know, or thought it was a life-threatening emergency, they can get off. You know, I assume, that there’s an exception in the law for life-threatening emergencies, which is why yours didn’t get you in trouble.”

“That reminds me, there’s something I’ve always wondered about Veritaserum. Why is it not used in the courts, at trials? It would seem perfect for that.”

“Not quite,” answered Kingsley. “It’s not foolproof. Veritaserum will make you accurately convey what you believe to be true, not what is true. Two people can genuinely remember the same event differently, and if you’re a little off in the head, you can give totally false testimony under Veritaserum. The chances are very small, but enough that we can’t just assume anything. Also, when you start forcing people to take it, you start down a treacherous road. That happened when it was developed a couple of hundred years ago. They started giving it to people based on nothing more than suspicion, or to see what they knew. They’d haul someone in off the street and give it to them just to see if they’d done anything illegal, if they looked disreputable. Soon there was a scandal involving its use, and after that, there was a backlash against using it like that.

“The last time there was a debate about its use was fifteen years ago, after you survived Voldemort’s Killing Curse, and he was driven off. As you know, people like Lucius Malfoy slipped back into respectable society, claiming they’d been bewitched, coerced, or put under the Imperius Curse. Many people suggested that Malfoy and others be given Veritaserum to confirm or refute their claims, feeling that what they were accused of justified it. Some people opposed it because they thought Voldemort was gone for good, and they could be re-integrated into society. A few, like Dumbledore, thought Voldemort would return, but opposed the Veritaserum anyway on grounds of principle. Eventually it was decided not to use it, but it was a heated debate.”

“Interesting,” Harry said, thinking. “If they had used it, the events with the Chamber of Secrets four years ago wouldn’t have happened, because Lucius Malfoy would have been in Azkaban. But Voldemort would have come back anyway, because the people who helped him either weren’t in Azkaban, or escaped.”

“Well, some would say that an action is right or wrong regardless of the result, which can be in the hands of fate,” pointed out Kingsley. “A rightly decided action can have terrible consequences, or a bad choice can have a good result. You have to judge the decision based on the information the people had at the time.”

“But Professor McGonagall said that Professor Dumbledore would have been removed as headmaster if the bomb had killed a hundred students, but since it didn’t, he stayed. But he made the same decision in either case. Why wouldn’t he have just been judged on the decision, not its results?”

With a wry smile, Kingsley said, “That’s why I used the words ‘some would say,’ Harry. Most people do judge actions based on the result. I don’t think that’s a good way to do it, and I think some people don’t either. It’s much easier to judge by results, but it’s really not right, I think. People do it because it’s easy.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. Even at lunchtime, I get an education, he thought.

Harry and Neville returned to Hogwarts in time for dinner, after which Harry continued his attempts to teach the way he did magic to his friends. Then they went back to the common room. Harry and Ginny enjoyed this time too, but they didn’t break off to be more alone; they couldn’t really be alone anyway, and they knew that if they did, and Hermione and Neville did too, then Ron would be alone. They didn’t want that, so they stayed together. Sometimes Ron went off by himself to plan Quidditch strategy, but Harry wondered if he also wanted them to have more time as couples. He felt unhappy that even if Ron and Pansy did get together, they wouldn’t be able to hang out in the common room together.

At eleven o’clock, Harry changed into his nightclothes and started to relax in bed. He picked up *Reborn From the Ashes* and started reading where he’d left off. The section he was reading was about how phoenixes companion humans, and it contained the quote Hagrid had used in his class. Harry had already been told some of this information when Fawkes had chosen him, but it was still interesting

to read. He went on to a section about the transition period from one companion to another: “The phoenix will sometimes bond with a new companion while the older one is still alive, but sometimes it will wait until the older one’s death to make its choice known, even if it has already decided who the new companion will be. It is known that the phoenix is more likely to choose the new companion during the life of the older one if the two companions are acquainted, giving the older one a chance to pass on useful information. But sometimes the phoenix will wait if it intuits that foreknowledge of the older one’s death will be unduly disturbing to him or her. This is because most phoenix companions are aware of the fact that the phoenix will not choose a new companion until it knows that the death of the older one is not far off, almost never more than a year away. As is often the case with phoenixes, humans do not know how the phoenix comes by this knowledge, but it is never incorrect. It is usually the case, of course, that a phoenix companion is one of sufficient strength of character and wisdom to truly grasp the inevitability of death, and not be unduly disturbed by it. The older companion often welcomes the information as an opportunity to tie up loose ends and get his or her affairs in order.”

The paragraph continued, but Harry had stopped reading. A cold chill went through his body, and he felt fear. Did that say what I think it said? he asked himself, and read the section again. Not wanting to believe it, he read it a third time. No, no, no, no, his mind shouted. I can’t accept this, I won’t accept this. This book says that Professor Dumbledore is going to die within a half a year.

Impulsively, he picked up the book and headed out of Gryffindor Tower, not looking back or around to see who might have noticed. It was after eleven o’clock, well past the time anyone was supposed to be out roaming around, but Harry didn’t care. Emotion rose up in him as he walked. He desperately wanted Dumbledore to tell him that the book was wrong or outdated, or that it didn’t apply in this situation because of the urgency of Harry’s need in September. But a part of him knew that would not happen.



He knocked on the door of Dumbledore's quarters; the door opened as Dumbledore got up from a chair and headed toward the door. Harry wordlessly lifted the book, preparing to open it to the page he'd read, but Dumbledore motioned him to put it down. "I know why you are here, Harry," he said sadly. To Harry's inquiring look, he said, "Yes, I am sorry, but what the book says is true." Fawkes burst into view, sat on his perch, and started singing.

Harry stood unmoving as grief washed over him. He found it hard to process what Dumbledore had said, simple though it was. Dumbledore stepped forward and took Harry into his arms, holding him. Finally, Harry's grief burst forth, and he started sobbing, his head on Dumbledore's shoulder. He held Dumbledore tightly, as if he could prevent his death by not letting him go. He cried and held him for a few minutes. When Harry stopped, Dumbledore gently guided him to his sofa, where they sat down.

"You can't die, sir, you just can't..." Harry said in desperation.

"I know this will be of little solace to you, Harry, but I am content. I am eighty-four years old, well past normal life expectancy, as I have mentioned to you. We all must go sometime, and I consider it just as well to go while I still possess all my faculties. My greatest regret, of course, is leaving you so soon after establishing this bond with you, which is precious to me. For your sake, I would prefer to stay longer. But for my own, it is not so important."

Harry was tearing up again. "I'm sorry, sir, I don't think I can deal with this. I mean, I loved Sirius, and then I lost him, way too soon. Now you, too... you mean as much to me as he did. It's not fair." He realized as he said it that he sounded like a six-year-old, but he didn't care. Life isn't fair, his mind told him.

Dumbledore, of course, did not say that. "I know, Harry. I fear there is nothing I can say that will give you any comfort. But I love you, and I will always, even after I am gone."

"So you think there's someplace that you'll still exist from, even after you die?" Harry asked, sniffing.

“Yes, Harry, I do,” replied Dumbledore. “You may recall that we touched on this subject during our chat after the dinner we had before the start of the term, when we were discussing the Veil of Mystery. I told you that I believed that the Veil led to a sort of way-station between our physical realm and that which awaits us beyond. I am as certain as I can be, without having experienced it personally, that this is true. I have spent some time this year talking to mystics from various countries and cultures, exchanging ideas and seeking their guidance. I have enough information to reach what I feel is an informed conclusion on the matter. I am confident that we proceed elsewhere, and that the spirit is eternal. I can tell you more about this, and I can also refer you to some books which espouse the same information that I am sure is true.

“I recognize that this will help you little, in that you will miss me all the same, whether my spirit survives or not. But it may help if you think of me not so much as being dead, but rather, elsewhere. I told you what I did at that time in the hope that when I did have to tell you this—and I would have told you before it happened—you would feel less despair over the prospect. I still hope that may be the case. I know that the finding out is a shock, but at least you have time to adapt to it somewhat before the event occurs.”

“Do you know when and how it will happen, sir? I mean, you seem fine right now. Do you have some disease, or...?”

“No, Harry. As of now, I am fine. Yes, I do know how, and I know roughly when.”

“Wait a minute, sir.” Something had clicked in Harry’s head, despite his grief. “You said... you knew about this when we had that dinner? But Fawkes hadn’t chosen me yet, then. How could you have known?”

Dumbledore nodded. “I was coming to that soon. But before I discuss that, there is another person who should be present.” Dumbledore took out his wand and summoned the golden dog, which went trotting off. “I am very sorry that this had to happen, Harry. I have benefited greatly from your company, and your love,

this year. I know I will not be replaceable to you, but I am comforted that you will never suffer from a lack of love. You now have Ginny, in whose eyes I see as much love as you could ever hope for from another person. You are loved greatly by your other four friends as well, as you know. You also receive the affection and respect of the Hogwarts teachers and students, and now the Aurors as well. I am confident that you will flourish after I am gone.” Just as Dumbledore finished speaking, there was a knock on the door. Dumbledore stood, clearly surprised that it had happened so soon. He walked toward the door as he opened it with his wand, Harry behind him.

Hermione walked in, eyes wide. “I was most of the way here already when I saw the dog,” she said. She walked to Harry and put her arms around him. “I’m sorry, Harry. I’ve known since December. I got you that phoenix book for Christmas, and I decided to read it before I gave it to you. Afterwards, I decided to get you something else instead. I didn’t see the point in you knowing all year, grieving all year.”

“I understand,” said Harry through new tears as she held him. “I can’t say for sure that I would have wanted to know.”

She let go, and stepped over to hug Dumbledore. “I’ll miss you so much, sir,” she said.

“Thank you, Hermione. But I wonder, how did you know to come here before you saw the dog?”

“I knew Harry bought the book, sir, and I knew he’d find this part eventually. I also know about what time he usually reads non-schoolbooks. I saw him leave his dormitory with the book, so I knew that he’d found it. I just wanted to... help comfort him, if I could. I was surprised to see the dog. Why did you send it for me?”

“There is something I knew I would be showing the two of you sometime soon, at the time I felt it right to warn you of what was to come. That time is

obviously here, so it is as well that you know.” The door opened, and the Pensieve came floating into the room, obviously Summoned by Dumbledore from his office.

“There was a prophecy given to me earlier this year which I will now show you. It is, Harry, the reason I knew of my fate even before Fawkes bonded with you.” With his wand he caused an image to extrude from the top of the Pensieve as he had last year to show Harry the prophecy Voldemort had sought. The image was of Professor Trelawney, sitting in Dumbledore’s office across the desk from him. Her head was tilted back and her jaw was slack, as Harry remembered her look when giving the prophecy she had near the end of his third year. Dumbledore moved his wand, and the image spoke:

“The endgame draws near; the white pieces are on their proper squares, poised. As summer dawns, the game can be won, in one and only one fashion. White must sacrifice the queen; by so doing, the rook may place the Black king in check. The king will escape, but this will allow the white bishop the opportunity to later deliver checkmate. For White, there is no other path to victory.” The image faded from the top of the Pensieve.

Harry looked very puzzled, his grief temporarily abated. “You should have called Ron,” he said. “This sounds more like a chess problem than a prophecy.”

“Yes, indeed it does, Harry. Hermione, I would be most interested in your opinion.”

“I guess we have to assume that, like the other prophecies, this has to do with the battle against Voldemort,” she said, thinking out loud. “Then I guess we would be white, and Voldemort, the black king. Sir, did you ever play chess on a life-size board, as one of the pieces?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Very astute. Yes, Hermione, one time. I was the queen.”

“That makes it make sense,” she said, sounding more sure. “Harry, you remember when we were going to get the Sorcerer’s Stone, we had to be the pieces in that game...”

Harry nodded, remembering. “I was a bishop, you were a rook. Wait, you think that’s us, you and I, being referred to in the prophecy? Couldn’t it be other people who played chess like he did?”

“It could, Harry,” conceded Dumbledore, “but the situation strongly suggests, nearly demands, that it be the two of you. It is suggested that you, Harry, the bishop, may checkmate the black king, Voldemort. That possibility has, of course, been prophesied before, so that is consistent. The fact that you are the bishop almost certainly means that Hermione is the rook.”

“But what does Hermione have to do with this?” asked Harry, still confused.

“Harry,” said Dumbledore seriously, “I know it is difficult to know only half a secret. You, Hermione, and I have crucial roles to play in what is to come. I know my role and hers; yours still cannot be discerned with any certainty, but we know it involves the final defeat of Voldemort. But it is also crucial that she not know my role, and that you not know mine or hers. I am very sorry, but it must be that way; for you to know would place all that could happen in jeopardy, destroying our only chance to defeat Voldemort. You must not know, you must not make attempts to guess. Even if it is frustrating, I believe you can understand the necessity.”

“Yes, sir, I can understand that,” he said. The thought of having only one chance to defeat Voldemort had sobered him considerably. “But Hermione knows her own role, too, right?”

Hermione looked pale. “Yes, I do. I mean, I didn’t know that it was going to be me to do it, but I know what I’m supposed to do.”

Harry saw that she was frightened, and was concerned. “But she’s not going to die, is she? She’ll be all right?”

Dumbledore somberly met Harry’s gaze. “The future is not written, Harry. The prophecies merely point a path. All we know is that while my death is necessary to accomplish our ends, hers is not, as there is no reference to it in the prophecy.”

“Harry,” she said, turning to him and gently gripping his shoulders. “You have to remember one thing: you’re the only one who can beat Voldemort. If it happens that you can sacrifice your life to save mine... don’t do it. You can’t. Thousands could die who wouldn’t otherwise. I know this is horrible for you to think about, but you have to promise me.”

Tears pressed against him yet again. “How can I promise that?” he asked, his voice cracking. “How could I watch you die? How could I live with myself, ever look at Neville again? I don’t think I could do it, Hermione.”

She looked desperate and earnest. “Neville knew what he was getting into, just like Ginny did. He would never blame you, he knows what I would want. I don’t want to leave him, I pray that it won’t happen. But we have to think about the big picture. Think about the consequences of not defeating Voldemort. There’s just no choice.

“But remember what he said. I don’t have to die, and to be honest, I don’t think I will. The prophecy says I don’t have to die, and I can’t do what I need to if I’m dead. So I really do think I’ll be okay. But the point is, under no circumstances can you die. If you need extra motivation to stay alive even if you’d rather sacrifice yourself, think of Ginny. If not for the thousands you don’t know, then stay alive for her.”

Harry could not escape the logic of that, though he desperately wanted to. He couldn’t bear the thought of leaving Ginny behind. He knew how he felt about Dumbledore leaving, and though he knew that Dumbledore didn’t have that many years remaining anyway, it was still terrible. He knew how many years he could have with Ginny, and it made him want to stay alive more than ever. He just didn’t want it to be at Hermione’s expense. He hugged her and said, “I want you to stay alive for Neville, just like I want to for Ginny. But I understand what you’re saying. All I can say is I’ll try. I know what’s at stake. But you know how hard it would be, if our positions were reversed.”

She nodded, holding him. “Yes, I know. But it has to be that way. And again, I do think I’ll be okay. Just hang on to that thought. I will.”

They separated. Harry looked at Dumbledore, and the thought of Dumbledore’s fate hit him with full force again, which Dumbledore noticed. “Harry, the events in question will not occur for at least five weeks. I hope that for that time, when you look at me, it will not be as though I am already gone. I hope it will be with the pleasure of my companionship, for however long we have the opportunity.”

“Of course, you’re right. I think I can do that. It’s just... kind of a shock... but I suppose it’s better to know now, than be surprised when it happens.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I agree, Harry. Believe me, I would have told you before the time came. To be honest, I am glad that my death can accomplish such a purpose as this; it somehow seems more worthwhile than simply passing away in one’s sleep. And as the book suggests, I have been able to spend the year preparing things. I am truly not disturbed, Harry. I know what will happen to me, I know that I will be fine.”

Harry hoped that was true; for now, he would take Dumbledore’s word for it. “When did you get this prophecy, sir?”

“Interestingly, it was on your sixteenth birthday. I was just seeing Sybil out of my office when you and Remus arrived. You may recall that I had to store some thoughts in the Pensieve before I could talk to you; I wanted to make sure that I forgot nothing. It was around that time that I suggested to Fawkes that he find a new companion, and mentioned you as a possibility. Not that he needed my advice, of course, but I know he respects me and welcomes it. He is sad that I must go, but he understands.”

“Who else at the school knows, sir?” asked Hermione. “I mean, Hagrid does, of course. I went to talk to him about it when I found out, we were both crying. You know how Hagrid is, and you know how much he loves you. It was

good to be able to talk to him about it. But who else knows? I'm almost surprised it wasn't public knowledge."

"Yes, Hermione, I was surprised myself that it was not mentioned in the Prophet, when the bond with Harry became known. I suppose those in the wizarding world who knew decided to not go out of their way to publicize it, which was thoughtful of them. As for the school, Professor McGonagall knew this about phoenixes, so she knew immediately, though she and Professor Snape had already been told of the prophecy. Except for Hagrid, I believe no other teacher knows as yet. As for students, the only one of whom I am aware that knows is Miss Abbott, who seems to have already been especially interested in phoenixes. Since becoming a prefect, she has visited me twice for the purpose of talking to and admiring Fawkes, and after Fawkes chose Harry, she came to express her condolences. I told her that they are more properly directed toward those I leave behind, but I appreciated her concern, and her discretion."

"Sir," said Harry, squeezing Dumbledore a bit harder as he spoke, "I'm glad that you're not bothered for you, but I'm still pretty bothered for me. I feel bad that I didn't spend more time with you this year than I did."

Amused, Dumbledore shook his head. "You have been very busy, Harry. I am glad we did spend as much time together as we have."

"I know, sir, me too, but you know what I mean... there's so much that I don't know... can you tell me, sir, were you ever married?"

Dumbledore led Harry and Hermione over to the sofa, and they all sat down. "Yes, I was. My wife's name was Agnes, she passed away sixteen years ago. She was seven years older than I. We never had any children, a matter of some regret to both of us, but we were content, because we had each other."

"You said sixteen years ago, sir," pointed out Harry. "It wasn't because..."

"No, it was not. She passed away from natural causes shortly before your encounter with Voldemort. But losing her at such an otherwise stressful time was very difficult."



Hermione nodded somberly. “I can imagine, sir. Would you tell us about her? What was she like?”

Harry felt like he and Hermione were a brother and sister being told bedtime stories by a kindly grandparent, but he didn't mind the comparison. He just wanted to be with Dumbledore, to be comforted. Hermione put her arms around Harry's stomach from behind and held on; he put his hands on hers. Dumbledore started telling them about his wife and their experiences, Harry and Hermione listening avidly. Dumbledore talked for more than an hour, finally suggesting at one o'clock that they go to sleep.

“Sir, I'll never be able to sleep if I go back to my dormitory, I know it,” Harry said. “I'll just be thinking about this all night.”

“I understand, Harry. I have a quantity of the liquid Madam Pomfrey uses to induce sleep. You drink some, and stay here tonight. Hermione, you are welcome to stay too, if you like.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said. “Yes, I'd like to stay with Harry.”

Dumbledore moved aside the chairs and sofa with his wand, then conjured up two comfortable-looking beds, with blankets and pillows. “You'll have to teach me how to do that, sir,” said Harry, impressed.

“I will be happy to,” chuckled Dumbledore. “It is not so difficult, really.”

Harry and Hermione started to get into their beds. “I wondered, sir, why don't all wizards make their own furniture, just conjure it up?” He recalled that some of the Weasleys' furniture was showing its age, and wondered why they didn't conjure up their own.

“Wizards can conjure physical items, but they are not permanent,” explained Dumbledore. Harry glanced at Hermione, and saw from her expression that she knew, but was trying not to interrupt. “Recall the leprechaun gold. The length the item remains solid depends on the wizard's strength; items I conjure tend to remain for as long as sixty hours. One could live in a home whose furnishings were entirely conjured, it would simply be inconvenient to have to keep doing it.”

Harry chuckled, imagining sitting in a chair and having it disappear. Dumbledore handed him a small glass of liquid. "I will wake you at seven-thirty, as you have a Quidditch match tomorrow." Much like a grandparent, Harry thought, Dumbledore leaned over and kissed Harry on the cheek, then Hermione, before heading into his bedroom.

"I'd totally forgotten about the Quidditch match," Harry said, leaning on his side facing Hermione. "It'll decide the Quidditch Cup, and normally I'd be all excited about it. Now, I don't even care. It just seems so unimportant."

"Well, now you know how I feel all the time," joked Hermione. Harry managed a small smile. "I know, Harry, but remember, it's important to your teammates, two of whom are also people you love. You'll want to do well, for them."

"I'll miss him so much, Hermione..." The thought prompted feelings of despair, which showed on his face. She looked at him with compassion, and reached for his free hand. "You especially, Harry, but the rest of us too. But he's right, he wouldn't have had that much longer, and he gets to accomplish something important. When your time comes, you could do worse than to go out that way, at the same age. It might help if you think about how you can help him in the next five weeks. Spend time with him, talk to him, learn more from him. He loves you so much, Harry, it'll make him happy to feel he got to be with you as much as possible. Don't mourn him when you're with him, but be happy that you get to be with him, and him with you. Don't waste these five weeks."

Harry nodded. She was right, as usual. He decided to try hard to do as she had suggested. "Thank you, Hermione. I don't know what I would do without you."

She smiled. "I don't plan to ever let you find out. Now, drink that, and go to sleep. You're only going to get six hours' sleep as it is."

He felt like he wanted to talk to her for longer, but he knew she was right about this, too. He drank the liquid, lay back, and thought of Ginny. He visualized her eyes, full of love for him. Thinking about that, he quickly dropped off to sleep.

Dumbledore was gently shaking his shoulder. “It is seven-thirty, Harry,” he said.

Harry looked around, momentarily surprised to find himself in Dumbledore’s quarters. He remembered why he was there; he saw Hermione, already up, sitting in a chair and reading a book. He sat up, then stood and hugged Dumbledore, who chuckled. “I suppose I should expect more of that over the next few weeks, which also pleases me.” He released Harry and gave him a loving look. “You should get down to breakfast, though. And Harry, please come to see me after the matches, and ask Ginny to come as well.”

Harry felt like making a joke. “Oh, good, sir, you’re going to marry us?”

Dumbledore and Hermione both laughed. “It would be a privilege, but for the fact that she is too young, and I lack the legal authority. I am pleased, though, that you are thinking in those terms. No, we have things to do at the Burrow, to make preparations for the security arrangements. My rational rationale, if I may, is that her presence may maximize your magical ability, though I know she need not be in your presence for her love to inspire you. The other reason is that it will please you, and her parents.”

“I especially like the second reason,” agreed Harry. Remembering that he had brought the phoenix book last night, he looked around for it, and saw it on a counter. Before picking it up, though, he looked at Dumbledore and said, “I want to thank you, Albus, for last night. I’m still sad, and I’m sure I will be, but you helped so much. You made me feel a lot better.”

“I am very glad, Harry,” said Dumbledore simply. Harry nodded, picked up the book, and left with Hermione.

They walked toward the Great Hall. “And you made me feel a lot better, too,” he said, putting an arm around her. “It’s so like you, to figure out what was going on and going to help. Thank you so much. Last night, I felt like we were his grandchildren, listening to him tell stories.”

She smiled. "I felt that way too. At one point, I thought of asking for hot chocolate."

Harry chuckled. "That would have been nice." He was about to continue, but at the end of the corridor ahead, he saw Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Pansy heading for them. He handed the book to Hermione and ran forward, stopping just in front of a surprised Ginny, who he hugged tightly. The other three looked bewildered, and Ginny said, "Harry, what—"

Harry cut her off. "We need to go to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, now," he said to all of them.

"Harry, there's not much time left for breakfast," protested Ron. "I mean, I've already eaten, but—"

Harry glared at him, letting Ron know that he would accept no argument. He started walking in the direction of the classroom, and the others followed. "Or, we could go to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom," muttered Ron, resigned but annoyed at not knowing the reason. They walked in silence the rest of the way, Harry holding Ginny's hand. Upon arriving, Harry quickly moved aside the fourteen extra desks and arranged the other six in a circle, and they sat down.

"I was reading this book about phoenixes last night, and I came to this section," he said. He then read the section. Seeing their expressions, he said, "I was really hoping he would tell me something like it didn't apply in this case, but he couldn't. He's known since it happened. He thinks he's got less than two months. Not a disease or anything, just something's going to happen."

The others looked at Harry with intense sympathy. Ginny got up and stood behind him, leaning over and hugging him around the neck. "Oh, Harry..."

Hermione continued the story, explaining how she ended up there and talking about the conversation they'd had, but avoiding any mention of the newest prophecy. "So, he gave Harry something to make him sleep, and he conjured up beds for us. Harry fell asleep right away, it took me another hour or so. He was so good, made us feel better, you know how he is."

“I’m really sorry, mate,” said Ron.

Fighting back tears, Pansy nodded. “I haven’t even spent that much time with him, but look at me. He’s been really good to me. Good to everyone, it seems. I’m so sorry, Harry, this is terrible. This must hurt so much.”

Harry nodded, leaning his head back next to Ginny’s. “It does. I’m going to miss him a lot. But there’s still some time, so like Hermione said to me, I don’t want to waste it. I want to spend more with him, while he’s still around. I think he knows I want to, and he wants me to also.”

Ginny kissed him on the cheek and said, “You should spend whatever time you want to, even if you would have spent it with me instead. I want you to. You’ll have me for years, you’re not getting rid of me. Be with him while you can.”

“I really want to be with you, Ginny, but I know what you mean, and I will. Maybe you and I can both go see him sometimes, I think he’d like that.”

Ron shook his head. “Funny, ten minutes ago, nothing was more important than this match. Now... it’s just hard to get worked up.” Ginny nodded her agreement.

“I thought the same thing, Ron,” said Harry. “But I want to win. Not for him exactly, I don’t think he cares who wins... but just for the idea of doing my best, which I’m sure he would want. Also, just so you know, we shouldn’t tell anyone else about this, that’s why I wanted to come here. I don’t think he wants the whole school knowing.”

They got up, and Harry put the desks back into their standard positions before they left. Pansy put an arm around him; he thanked her. They headed out to the Great Hall, each lost in thought.

Ron gave no speech after the team changed into their Quidditch uniforms. He just nodded at them, and they marched off to the pitch. The Slytherin-Hufflepuff match would be first, and they would watch from the areas on the sidelines reserved for the teams not playing yet.

They sat down on the benches. “Anybody care who wins?” asked Ron. He got no responses. “Yeah, me neither,” he agreed. “Still, we should watch carefully, especially Hufflepuff. They looked pretty good in the first match against Ravenclaw, so they may be the ones we have to watch out for next year.”

“And there’s no point in watching Slytherin especially carefully,” said Dennis. “They replaced Crabbe and Goyle with two seventh year girls, so except for Dalton, the entire team is seventh years. Next year, it’s going to be basically a whole new team.”

“How are they going to choose a new team?” asked Katie. “Snape doesn’t know anything about Quidditch, he’ll never be able to choose.”

“Interesting question,” said Ron. “Maybe they’ll have Madam Hooch do it.”

Dumbledore stepped forward. “Thank you for coming out today. First, let me again thank the Aurors flying around the pitch for their efforts in providing extra security.” The crowd applauded them politely.

“Next,” he continued, “In the previous two days of Quidditch, I have at this time announced the presence of a magic-detection field on the pitch. That field is not up today, as there is no reason for it. I did not plan to put it up for the first matches in October, but an hour before those matches, Pansy Parkinson came to me to warn me of the danger that Harry Potter faced from the Confundus Beam. Her warning saved Harry from prolonged exposure and very likely injury, and I’m sure you all join me in thanking her.”

Leaping to his feet along with the rest of the team, Harry vigorously applauded, looking for Pansy in the crowd. He found her between the Slytherin and Gryffindor sections, with Neville and Hermione, her head in her hands. The whole crowd was applauding enthusiastically. He saw Hermione put an arm around her shoulders and say something to her. She looked up, saw Harry, and blew him a kiss. Harry and his teammates laughed, along with those of the crowd who’d seen it. He did the same in response, mentally thanking Dumbledore.

“Madam Hooch?” said Dumbledore, gesturing to her and walking off the pitch. She had the captains shake hands, and the match got underway. Harry didn’t care who won, but he watched with interest anyway. Occasionally he would think of Dumbledore. Once, Ginny looked at him while he was, and he looked back. “Not hard to see what you’re thinking,” she said quietly. “My poor Harry.” He mouthed the words ‘I love you’ to her, which she did in return. They had started doing that more in the past few weeks in response to the normal lack of privacy at Hogwarts.

As most of the Gryffindor team expected, Hufflepuff was the superior team, scoring eleven goals to Slytherin’s three. However, Dalton got the Snitch at the end of an exciting race with the Hufflepuff Seeker, pulling out the win for Slytherin. “Well, I have a feeling Hufflepuff will be looking for a new Seeker next year,” commented Ginny. “I mean, all year they had a goal differential of...”

“Plus sixteen,” Ron supplied.

“So, they scored twenty-three goals to the opposition’s seven, but they lost all three matches,” Ginny continued. “I kind of can’t help remembering what Hermione said in October. Getting the Snitch certainly is all-important.”

“Well, that’s what we have Harry for,” said Ron with certainty. Harry wished he could be as certain as Ron

After Colin’s Star of the Match interview with Dalton, the Gryffindor team headed out to the field. The two teams stood near each other, waiting for Madam Hooch to get the match underway. Harry found himself near Cho, and walked over. “Hi, Cho,” he said. “Nervous?”

She shook her head casually. “Not at all. You?”

“Just another match,” he said, the same way. They both smiled.

“Oh, I meant to do this after I got out of the Chamber, and I didn’t,” he said. “I was going to do what you said back in September, after the scroll, and tell you that you were right. You knew it better than I did.”

“I really hope it works out, Harry,” she said sincerely.

“Thanks, Cho. I appreciate it.”

Madam Hooch asked the captains to shake hands, and Harry and Cho separated, and mounted their brooms. The whistle sounded, and everyone took off. Harry listened for Colin's commentary.

"Ginny reaches the Quaffle first, and she speeds for the goal... she scores! Oh, my, she just blew right by Rowan, who didn't seem to be ready. But how can you be ready for a Firebolt? Gryffindor leads, ten-zero. Boot with the Quaffle, passes to Stanton, over to Corner, back to Boot, he shoots, blocked by Ron, who passes out to Bell... Just a quick note, I'm using Ron and Ginny Weasley's first names, otherwise I have to keep saying their full names, which is a waste— and there's Ginny, speeding past the Ravenclaw defense again, shoots, it's in! Twenty-zero! Oh, dear, Ravenclaw is going to have to adjust fast, or it'll be a long morning for them... Potter high up, in his standard search pattern, while Chang is flying all over, in no particular pattern, it should be interesting to see what happens with that... Boot to Corner, off to—intercepted by Creevey, hands it off to Ginny, who's already past the Ravenclaw defenders, shoots, it's in! Rowan just can't seem to react fast enough to the Firebolt's speed. Boot streaks down the field, Creevey on him, Boot shoots, Creevey gets in the way, and it bounces off him before Ron has a chance at it! Ron flies down and catches it, passes to Creevey, off to Bell, she's down the field near the goal, passes back to Ginny zooming in, fakes out Rowan and scores! She feinted right and went down the middle, and it's forty-zero Gryffindor in the first two minutes..."

In his search pattern, Harry could see nothing. He saw Cho flying around randomly, and for some reason he felt nervous that she would reach it before him, even though he was covering the space more efficiently than she was.

He thought about what Dumbledore had said about Pansy, and then about Dumbledore in general. It had been about thirty seconds before he realized that he was still flying his usual search pattern, but had been so occupied in his thoughts that he had not been looking for the Snitch at all. He kicked himself mentally and started focusing on the Snitch again.



After five more minutes, Gryffindor was leading by eighty-zero, and Harry was no nearer finding the Snitch. Don't get impatient, he told himself, it hasn't been that long, it just seems that way because Ginny's scoring so many goals. Keep calm, that's what Dumbledore would do, he used to play Quidditch, I'm sure he...

A minute later, Harry realized that he had done it again. What brought him out of it was a quick motion from the Snitch in his field of vision; it was gone now, but he had the sense that it was there a few seconds ago, ready to be taken, but he just hadn't been looking. Why did the damn match have to be today, he thought, how can I concentrate when this person I love so much is going to die soon? Concentrate now, you moron, he told himself, he would want you to. Shaking his head, he headed down the field.

When he got fairly near the Gryffindor goal, Ron shouted at him, "Harry! Over here!" Surprised, Harry flew over; no one had ever tried to have a conversation with him during a match before. Ron said, "Harry, I want you to follow Cho, keep as tight to her as you can. Your job is to stop her from getting the Snitch."

Harry flushed with shame; Ron had obviously noticed him not concentrating, and thought he had a better chance of seeing the Snitch by following Cho. He was surprised at Ron's lack of confidence, but at the same time, he felt he deserved it. Still, he said, "No, Ron, really, don't do that. I can do better."

Ron looked at him as if he had spoken a foreign language. "What are you talking about? This has nothing to do with—" Ron stopped talking as Boot came at him with the Quaffle, readied himself, and blocked the shot. As Cho flew near, Ron held onto the Quaffle a few seconds longer than he had to. "Get moving, Harry!" he shouted. He passed the Quaffle to Katie.

Harry was still unhappy. "Look, Ron, I don't think we have to do—"

As Cho flew off, Ron shouted impatiently, "Harry, we don't have time to argue! Just do what I said!" Harry shot Ron an angry glance and flew off. He located Cho halfway down the field. He glanced up and saw that the score was now

one hundred-zero Gryffindor; he hadn't noticed the last two goals. He started listening to Colin again as he gained on Cho.

“...and what some of you may have heard was Gryffindor captain Ron Weasley giving instructions to Seeker Harry Potter, who was obviously not happy with the instructions... Ginny up from below, to Bell, back to Ginny, she scores yet again, she's scored all eleven Gryffindor goals, the match is still a shutout...”

Harry caught up with Cho, still angry at Ron, still confident he would be able to get the Snitch himself if he tried harder. He knew that he was angry because he was embarrassed, but it didn't make him less angry. He flew alongside Cho; she took a hard left, he instantly turned to follow. She dove for five seconds, then flattened out; again, he kept pace, never more than a few yards away from her. Side by side now, to his surprise, she gave him a little smile. “Why were you arguing with Ron, Harry? I was wondering when you were going to start doing this.”

Harry was now very puzzled; how could Cho have noticed him losing his concentration? He kept with her, but kept an ear on Colin's commentary, which now mentioned him more prominently.

“...and another great save for Ron, he's having a fantastic match, as is his sister... Potter sticks with Chang like glue, okay, for those of you not so familiar with Quidditch strategy, let me explain what's going on here. Gryffindor is ahead by one hundred ten points—sorry, one hundred twenty, another goal from Ginny—and it looks like the only way for Ravenclaw to win is for Chang to get the Snitch before Gryffindor takes a lead of one hundred sixty or more. Ron obviously instructed Potter to follow Chang closely and do whatever he can to make sure she doesn't get the Snitch. I'm not sure why Potter objected, it's a fairly straightforward strategy move. My guess—another good save by Ron—is that Potter doesn't think it's sporting, doesn't want to win that way. He'd rather find the Snitch by himself, not win by preventing Chang from getting it. That's an admirable attitude, but Ron is right, in sports, you do what you have to to win, if it's legal, which what Potter is doing is. Getting back to the action...”

Harry was now even more embarrassed; now that Colin had said it, it was totally obvious, but he was so focused on his embarrassment that it hadn't occurred to him. Boy, this is my worst match ever, he thought. Lucky Ron and Ginny are having such good ones, might make up for me.

As these thoughts went through his head, Cho glanced at him affectionately. "Colin's right, Harry, so is Ron. You have to do this. I mean, I'm not happy about it, but it's the thing to do."

Harry was following her so closely it was easy to have a conversation with her, but he was still trying to look for the Snitch and keep close to her at the same time. "I'd just rather find it myself. I hated it when Malfoy did this to me," he said, with words that were not untruthful, but conveying an impression that was. He could hardly admit to her that he had been having trouble concentrating, and he appreciated Colin's unwitting assistance.

"That's so you, Harry," she said, twisting away from him; he caught her again a few seconds later. "But this is really different, you know that. Malfoy just followed you because he knew you'd find the Snitch faster than him, and he wanted to knock you off your broom or whatever. Here, this is the right strategy move. And I know I'm never going to lose you, with your reflexes and that Firebolt. I practically have to have the Snitch jump up in front of me, to get it right now."

That made him feel bad, as well. "I admit, I don't like the idea that we'll win because of better equipment," he said. "I mean, look at what Ginny's doing. She's good, but I don't think she'd be doing that if not for the Firebolt."

"That's what you get for being generous, Harry," she teased him as she turned right; he easily kept pace. "I was wondering, why did you do that?"

"I knew it would make him really happy. I just wanted to."

Cho chuckled. "Boy, was I stupid."

Harry looked at her quizzically, then realized what she meant. "C'mon, Cho, you know that's not true. I just made you think of Cedric too much, that wasn't anybody's fault."

“I was only kidding, Harry. Well, half-kidding, anyway. I didn’t like you because you were generous, just because, you know, of how you are. I should have given myself more time to get over Cedric.” He tried to concentrate on looking for the Snitch and listen to her at the same time. “Can I ask you, Harry, why did you like me?”

He answered almost without thinking, so hard was he concentrating. “Because you’re really pretty, and nice. Even when I first played against you, in third year, I got all nervous every time I looked at you, like somebody was going to see what I was thinking.” Harry was now paying no attention to the rest of the match, or what Colin was saying.

“That’s so sweet, Harry, thank you,” she said, still looking for the Snitch. “I liked you too, you know, even then. I just sort of fell for Cedric first. I felt really bad when I had to turn you down for the Triwizard Ball.”

“Not as bad as I felt, I’ll bet,” he said. “But you were nice about it. I just took too long. I wanted to ask you right away, I was just too nervous. It was too late by the time I did.”

“You know, Harry, I really was just teasing you. I only did it because people tease me, like, how did you let him get away? But I’ve seen how you are with Ginny, I see how you look at each other. I don’t think I’ve ever seen two people who love each other like you do. Did you know that everybody talks about it, how you two are, how you say ‘I love you’ to each other without sound, as if people couldn’t figure out what you were saying?”

Harry went a light crimson. “Ah, I see you didn’t know,” she chuckled. “Well, I think it’s sweet, you shouldn’t stop doing it. But my point was, I don’t know if you would have been like that with me. You’re just so comfortable with her, you weren’t like that with me. I do think these things happen for a reason. I’m sure I’ll find someone. Maybe not a living legend who has his own Chocolate Frog card, but I’m sure there’s someone who I’ll love and who’ll love me.”

“I’m sure of that too, Cho,” he said, still scanning for the Snitch. “And thank you for what you said about Ginny and I. I didn’t know we were quite that obvious, but in a big way, I don’t care. I feel how I feel.”

“I know, that’s what makes it so cute,” said Cho. “And everyone knows what’s your favorite couples’ place to go to, the one near the lake.”

“Did you really have to tell me that?” he asked plaintively, and she laughed. “I mean, I already think everyone’s looking at me because I’m Harry Potter. Now I’m just going to—“

”Don’t worry about it, Harry,” she admonished him. “People just like to talk, it doesn’t mean they don’t like you or respect you. They know you need to be alone sometimes, it’s no big deal.”

“That was what Ginny said, the first time we went,” Harry admitted. “But I doubt that she knew that people were going to be keeping track of us.”

“Yeah, I heard you’re not too crazy about being a celebrity,” she said. “But remember, to us you may be a celebrity, but you’re also an incredibly brave wizard who’s going to help beat Voldemort someday, not to mention a nice person. The people who know you don’t think of you as a celebrity.”

“Thanks, Cho.” He suddenly heard Ron shouting at him from quite a distance. “Why’s Ron yelling at me?” he wondered aloud.

“Well, let’s find out,” she said, and swung around, heading in his direction. As they approached Ron, coming down from a higher position, he shouted, “Harry, couldn’t you hear me? Colin even mentioned I was trying to talk to you. You can go off on your own again if you want to.” Cho swung around again, but Harry continued to follow her. He glanced up at the scoreboard; the score was now one hundred ninety to zero.

Cho caught Harry’s surprised look and smiled. “He’s been trying to get your attention since it was one hundred sixty to zero. I kept you at the other end because I was enjoying talking to you, didn’t want you to go away yet.”

Harry smiled broadly. “That’s probably the sneakiest compliment I’ve ever gotten. I guess I should go off by myself, people are going to think I’m being unsportsmanlike.”

“I could grab your broom, make you stay,” she joked. “Okay, go ahead, if you want to.”

“Thanks again, Cho. You really took my mind off the match, and right now, that was a good thing.” He flew off toward the Gryffindor side again, and resumed his normal search. Two goals later, with Gryffindor leading by two hundred ten to zero, he saw Cho dive at the Ravenclaw end. He headed that way, but it was much too far. She zoomed down and caught the Snitch, Madam Pomfrey blew the whistle, and the match was over. “Cho Chang captures the Snitch, and Gryffindor wins, by a score of two hundred ten to one hundred fifty,” announced Colin. “Gryffindor wins its third consecutive Quidditch Cup.”

The Gryffindors landed, and met in the center of the pitch. They had a kind of group hug as the crowd cheered. They separated into individual hugs. Harry was hugged by Katie, and found Ron waiting for him. As they hugged, Harry said, “I’m sorry, Ron, I was being stupid.”

“What was the problem, anyway?” Ron asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Harry answered, breaking off from Ron to hug Ginny. They headed towards the sidelines, still congratulating each other. Colin was saying, “Well, friends, there were obviously two Stars of the Match for Gryffindor today, and whichever one I pick, I do a disservice to the other. Ron had a brilliant sixteen-save shutout, and Ginny scored a phenomenal twenty-one goals and had seven steals. Let me see if I have a Galleon to flip... no, I don’t. Bad luck. Ron Weasley, would you come up here please?”

Ron shrugged and headed off, as the crowd applauded. Harry kept his arm around Ginny, enjoying the excuse to be affectionate with her openly. Ron sat down next to Colin as his teammates watched.

“First, let me say congratulations, Ron, to you and your teammates.”

“Thank you, Colin,” said Ron. “You know, I think you did my sister a disservice by not choosing her as Star of the Match.” This got some laughs from the crowd, as well as Colin.

“I think you’re right, Ron,” Colin cheerfully agreed. “That was an amazing match. For you, even better than the one that won you the championship last year. How did you manage not to let a single goal score?”

“I don’t know how to explain it, Colin,” Ron said. “I was just really focused, and when I guessed, I guessed right. It’ll probably never happen again just like that.”

“Your sister Ginny’s performance was also amazing; I think the twenty-one goals and seven steals are new Hogwarts records. The obvious thing people will think, though, is that the Firebolt had a lot to do with it. What are your thoughts?”

“My first thought is that I’d better be careful what I say, or I’ll never hear the end of it,” joked Ron.

Still with her arm around Harry, Ginny laughed. “It’s okay, Ron, you can tell him the truth,” she shouted.

“Well, obviously it’d be stupid to say it had nothing to do with it,” Ron conceded. “But the fact is that it takes a lot of skill to put that kind of good broom to good use. We knew she was going to do most of the scoring today, and we practiced with that in mind. Everyone had to get used to the speed of the new broom, and they did a great job, as you saw. I think that most people, even with that broom, wouldn’t have done as well.”

“I think many of us who’ve watched Harry over the years, Ron, were surprised to see him not get the Snitch. Were you?”

“A little, yes, but it had to happen sometime, and it was better that it happened when we had a big enough lead that it didn’t matter. He’s an excellent Seeker, and even excellent Seekers don’t get the Snitch every time.”

“When the score got to eighty-zero, you called Harry over to tell him to shadow Cho, and he clearly didn’t want to do it. Why was that?”

“I don’t know, Colin, I haven’t had a chance to talk to him about it. There wasn’t time for a debate during the game. I mean, he may have a shield for the Killing Curse, but I’m the captain, and he has to do what I tell him. But your guess was what I thought as well. If Harry has a fault, it’s being too sportsmanlike. I agree with what you said: you do what you have to do to win, and that was the thing to do. Even though he didn’t want to, Harry did a good job shadowing Cho.”

“That was the Star of the Match, Gryffindor captain and Keeper Ron Weasley. Thank you, Ron, and congratulations on winning the Quidditch Cup.”

Ron headed down to the field as Harry shook his head in wonder. When you have a good reputation, he thought, you get credit for things you don’t deserve it for. Still, he had been blamed before for things that weren’t justified, so he supposed it sometimes evened out.

Harry would have liked to join the championship party in Gryffindor Tower, but he and Ginny had to go to Dumbledore’s office. Harry explained to Ginny where they were going, then regretfully told the team that there was something they had to do.

“Don’t let him fool you, they’re just going off to snog,” joked Katie Bell to much laughter. Embarrassed, Harry left Gryffindor Tower, followed by Ginny. “I wonder if that’s what they really think,” he said as they walked toward Dumbledore’s office.

“So what if they do,” shrugged Ginny. “Not a bad idea, really. Kind of hard to explain to them that you need to help with security at the Burrow. By the way, why did you argue with Ron?”

Harry told her, and she shook her head. “I’m sorry. I guess it’s easy to understand how that would happen.”

Harry nodded. “Quite a game you had.”

She shrugged. “Part of me thinks Ron was being nice, what he said to Colin. I mean, I know I’m a good Chaser, but there’s no way I score that much



without the Firebolt. I bet that's why Colin chose Ron instead of me, and he'd be right to. I didn't see all his saves, but he did terrific."

"He sure did," Harry agreed.

"I thought I heard you talking to Cho a couple of times," she said. "What were you talking about?"

He related the conversation to her. "Well, Dad did tell me there would be times I'd feel jealous," she mused. "She'd be glad to have you back, I'm sure. I mean, I'm sure she means what she says about being happy for you, but she must have regrets."

"I hope not," he said. "It's funny, I still don't know her that well. That conversation was probably the longest we've ever had, it just doesn't happen naturally. If I went out of my way to have a conversation with her, just to get to know her better as a friend, is that something that would make you jealous?"

She chuckled. "Harry, I might feel jealous at times if any random woman looks at you in a certain way. You shouldn't not do things when you mean well because they might make me jealous. I know, my head knows, that you would never do that to me. I think I just have to get used to it... I guess the more you have to lose, the more you worry about losing it. But really, I know I won't lose you like that. You should do what you think is best. If you feel like you want to talk to Cho, then you should talk to her."

Harry nodded, not sure what he would do. "Part of me wants to, just because she's always been nice to me, especially supporting me this year. But part of me doesn't want to because of how it might make you feel. I don't know if it's that important to me to risk upsetting you."

"Harry, I think you didn't catch one of the things I just said," she said humorously. "I said, 'You shouldn't do or not do things when you mean well because they might make me jealous.' I did mean that. My feelings are important, but they're not rational. You have to learn which ones to change your behavior

because of, and which ones not to. This is one of the ones not to. I'll be sure to let you know when you should change your behavior because of my feelings.”

“I have a feeling you will,” he agreed. “I’m sure I have a lot to learn.”

“We both do, Harry. Just remember what Tonks said was most important.”

He chuckled. “I’ll try. Lemon drop.” The gargoyles allowed them to pass, and he knocked on the door, which opened. “Harry, Ginny, good to see you.” To Harry’s surprise, Ginny walked up to the standing Dumbledore and hugged him wordlessly. He hugged her back with affection. “Thank you, Ginny. But Harry may not have had a chance to relate all of our conversation. Except for missing Harry, I have no regrets about what will happen. I am content. He needs cheering up much more than I do.”

She released him and stepped back to stand next to Harry, holding his hand; she had obviously decided that she didn’t mind displaying her affection for him around Dumbledore. “I know, sir. I think I can do that pretty well.”

Dumbledore smiled. “I believe you can,” he agreed. “And Ginny, as this is the first time I have had the chance to talk to you since you became a couple, I wish to express my deep happiness that Harry has found such a person as you. I see how you love him, and I could wish nothing better for him.”

Harry could see Ginny swell with pride. “Thank you, sir. That means so much to me. I’m just very lucky.” She put an arm around him and squeezed for emphasis.

“You are both lucky, to have discovered your feelings for each other. Harry, have you informed Ginny of why I suggested she come?”

“No, sir, there hasn’t been time.” He explained it to Ginny, who responded, “I really don’t care why I’m there, Harry, if I get to be with you. I know you’ll have to concentrate. I’ll just admire you and enjoy being around you.”

Embarrassed, Harry smiled. “An excellent attitude, Ginny. Shall we go?” asked Dumbledore. They stood and left the office, heading for the fireplace in Hogsmeade.

“Sir, I have a question,” said Ginny as they walked. “Harry was just telling me that when he was following her in the Quidditch match, Cho teased him about people knowing which couples’ place we like to go to. I have to imagine the teachers know all about that, right?”

He smiled. “Certainly, Ginny. After all, many of them used them when they were students themselves. I gather the thrust of your question is, why are they allowed?” Ginny nodded. “Of course, they are not allowed officially, but they are not disallowed either. We could say that their existence, and the school’s tolerance of them, is a recognition of human nature. Young people will have these urges well before they graduate from Hogwarts, and they are powerful urges. The complete and effective banning of any intimate personal contact among the students would simply lead many to riskier pursuits in the desire to be alone, such as attempting to leave the Hogwarts grounds, or finding empty classrooms into which anyone could walk at any time. It is understood that the couples’ places help to eliminate that sort of risk.

“I should say, however, that I for one do not disapprove of such encounters. They are a fact of life, and one of the more pleasant ones. Some people feel that students are too young for that, but I feel that in this area, given proper information, young people are ready to do more than what most adults would wish them to do. Unfortunately, any open recognition of this by the Hogwarts staff would bring considerable criticism from parents, so we keep things the way they are.”

“It wouldn’t bring criticism from my parents, I know that,” said Ginny, as they walked out of the castle entrance, drawing surprised looks from nearby students.

“Yes, Harry told the staff what your mother said, and Minerva mentioned it to me. Of course, I agree with her attitude. Minerva also told me, Harry, about how you responded to her comment about the couples’ places; it was very amusing.”

Dumbledore explained to Ginny what had happened, which gave Ginny a good laugh. “Why didn’t you tell me about that?” Ginny asked Harry reprovingly. “That was hilarious!”

Harry shrugged. “I guess I just don’t think to repeat things from the staff room,” he said. “I feel like... they’re used to the idea that they’re talking to other teachers, and the students aren’t going to know what they say. My situation is unique, since I’m both a student and a teacher, and if they thought I was going to go around telling students what happened in there, they wouldn’t be comfortable with me. It’s important to me that they are.”

“I understand,” Ginny said, “but now it’s different with you and I. I’m your... I was going to say girlfriend, but somehow it doesn’t feel like a strong enough word with us. It sounds too casual, and we feel more than that. I like Hermione’s phrase, ‘special person.’ Anyway, I’m your special person, and you can tell me things you wouldn’t tell anyone else, and I won’t repeat them. You should know that.”

“I do know that,” Harry agreed. “I guess I just hadn’t thought about the staff room thing like that.”

“Ginny is right, of course, Harry,” commented Dumbledore. “One of the many great pleasures of having a ‘special person’ is the sharing of confidences which we would share with no one else. I do not think the staff would be bothered at the notion of your telling Ginny things, in this context.”

“Yes, sir, but they might not understand our situation. We’re still so young, and people our age sometimes go through lots of boyfriends or girlfriends. We want to be together for the rest of our lives, but they may not know that.”

Dumbledore smiled. “People see how you and Ginny are, Harry. I think they understand that better than you might think they do.” They walked through the castle gates and into Hogsmeade.

“Sir, there’s something I wondered about,” began Ginny. “I’ve told that to other fifth years, and they don’t contradict me, but some of them have this look, like I don’t know what I’m talking about. One of them said, ‘You’re only a fifth

year, how can you know who you want to marry?’ I know, and I’m sure I know, and Harry says he does too, but—“

”‘Does,’ not ‘says he does,’” corrected Harry.

She gave him a quick smile in acknowledgment. “I guess it’s easier to accept it from me than from you. But anyway, do you think that there is any chance that we’re fooling ourselves, that we really believe this but there’s just no way we can know?”

“Love is quite a mystery, in a way,” said Dumbledore. “It is a powerful force, as Harry has been demonstrating, but we cannot really ‘know’ anything about it except by personal experience; there is nothing objective about it. So, the answer to your question must necessarily be stated as an opinion, of which there are many different ones. Mine is that no one should conclude that anyone else is fooling themselves in this regard. It could be true, but no one else can even make an informed guess without knowing the participants intimately.

“My feeling is that love is like faith; if you feel it strongly, then you have it, and you do not require proof or explanation. I do not need to use my talents as a Legilimens to know that yours is extremely strong, on both parts. All you need to succeed is to be determined that it will endure, no matter what difficulties you face, and to be willing to face those difficulties and work through them. When Voldemort first invaded Harry’s dreams back in September, Harry faced the trial partly because the alternative—surrender—was unacceptable. Every long-term relationship has trials; some will seem overwhelming. But if both parties’ love does not waver—or, to put it another way, if the idea of separating is seen as unacceptable—then both parties will be willing to make whatever efforts are necessary to overcome them. These efforts can be daunting. But the power of love will always defeat them in the end, if both partners feel it powerfully enough. So to finally answer your question, you could be seen as fooling yourselves if you believed that your relationship would always be easy, and free of trouble. But to be

determined that your love will last a lifetime, and be willing to do what it takes to make sure it does, I believe that is something you can know now.”

Harry and Ginny were silent for a moment. Harry reflected that this was one of the reasons he wanted to spend more time with Dumbledore while Dumbledore was still around. “Did you have... difficulties in your marriage, sir?”

“Certainly, Harry. No two people, however much in love, are perfectly suited to each other in every respect. Difficulties will inevitably arise. They are part of the challenges of life. If we never had challenges, we would never truly know who we are, what we are capable of. But though the difficulties were serious at the time, they never truly threatened the bond we had. We had faith in our love, and were ready to do what was necessary to protect it, as I am sure you two will as well.”

“Sir, other than having faith and being willing to do whatever is necessary, what do you think is the most important thing for a relationship to succeed?” asked Ginny.

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. “There are almost as many answers to that question, Ginny, as there are relationships. But one answer that is common to most relationships is that it is important to empathize, to understand how the other person thinks and sees things. If one applies one’s own standards and attitudes in trying to understand another’s actions or attitudes, one will not truly understand the other. So, for example, Harry, if Ginny has suffered a trying and emotionally difficult experience and needs your help and support, it is not enough for you to simply know what the event was; you must also know how she sees it, how her beliefs, attitudes, and experiences factor into her experience of the event. If you try to understand how she feels by asking yourself the question, ‘how would I feel if this happened to me,’ you may, depending on the circumstances, be unable to effectively advise, console, and support her. We all must feel that we are understood and appreciated, most especially by those we love.”

“I feel like I should be writing this down,” said Harry, only half-joking.

Dumbledore chuckled. “You may not remember everything I have said in one hour, Harry, but you will remember in your heart, especially when the time comes to apply it. Your heart will want to do what will support and help her, and she will for you. You will simply need experience to learn how to do it, and that will come with time. You need not dwell on it now, though it is helpful to think generally about such matters.”

“It sounds like we have an adventure ahead of us, sir,” Ginny said, as they approached the Owl Office, which contained the fireplace they would be using.

“Yes, Ginny, but I do not wish to intimidate you,” Dumbledore said. “It is a wonderful adventure, with far more joy than sorrow. You have experienced the wonder of it already, and will continue to do so. That is why I am so happy for both of you.” Harry and Ginny shared a smile as they walked into the Owl Office.

Molly and Arthur were waiting in the living room as Harry, then Ginny, then Dumbledore stepped out of the fireplace. Molly hugged Harry and kissed him on the cheek, as he did her. “It’s so wonderful to have you two here, even if it’s just for the afternoon,” she said enthusiastically as she hugged and kissed Ginny.

As Harry shook Arthur’s hand, he said, “I really want to thank both of you for having me for the summer, and Pansy, even though it means making some changes here. This is your home, it shouldn’t have to be some high-security fortress.”

Molly shrugged. “Voldemort is after one of our loved ones,” she said, “and we want to do whatever we can to keep you safe. This is your home too, Harry, and we’re not going to ask you to stay someplace else. We want you here, and now that’s doubly true, because of you and Ginny. You just have to be together over the summer.”

“That’s what we think too, Mum,” said Ginny happily. “I’m so glad we’ll get to be able to.”

“If you would excuse us, I would like to have a word with Arthur and Molly,” said Dumbledore, and they went into the kitchen. As soon as they were out of sight, Harry and Ginny fell into a kiss. “Oh, I can’t wait for summer,” Ginny enthused after they broke apart. “To have you around all the time... I know you’ll be doing a lot of Auror training, but you’ll still be here a lot. Mum sometimes goes out shopping, you know... we’ll be able to be in my room, all alone.” Her eyes provided more commentary on what she had in mind.

Harry smiled, appreciating her enthusiasm. “That sounds really good,” he agreed. “But Ron’ll be in the house, and so will Pansy.”

“They can be alone in Ron’s room,” Ginny said reasonably. “They won’t disturb us, we won’t disturb them.”

“They’re not even a couple yet!” Harry pointed out, surprised that Ginny sounded so sure.

“They will be,” she said with certainty. “It’s bound to happen. Probably before the summer, but definitely during the summer.”

“I hope you’re right,” he said, then kissed her, because they were alone and he could.

“I am,” she said. “They won’t announce it, of course; it won’t be like how you told me. Oh, Harry, I’m so glad you did that...” She snuggled against him, then continued, “We’ll probably find out by looking at a map and seeing them in one of the couples’ places.”

“Or Hermione will figure it out by piecing together little bits of information, and tell us,” Harry suggested.

Ginny shook her head. “Hermione’s more discreet than that. She may find out that way, but she won’t tell us. She’ll wait for them to do it.”

“That’s true, hadn’t thought of that,” Harry conceded. “That would be funny, us four in the house, two couples. I guess they’d know not to walk in on us if your door was closed.”



“Well, they’d only do it once, that’s for sure,” she said casually, before breaking out into a grin at his startled expression. “Just kidding, of course they wouldn’t. You’re so easy to tease. One of the many things I love about you.”

“I’m glad, I guess,” he said, eyeing her warily but lovingly. He leaned over and kissed her again. Just as they finished, Harry heard a voice.

“I’m sorry, Harry, Ginny,” said Dumbledore, his tone suggesting he was truly sorry to have interrupted them, “but we would like you to join us in the kitchen, if you would.” They got up, followed him into the kitchen, and sat down at the table, as did Dumbledore.

“We were just discussing some of the practicalities of making the modifications to the house,” Dumbledore said, “and how it would be done. Normally in a case such as this, a request would be made of the Ministry to provide the necessary materials and funds. The cause is certainly legitimate; they would not turn it down. But, in the classic fashion of bureaucracies, it could be delayed, debated over, and so forth, and the process could last beyond June, which would be an unacceptable delay. So we must consider that we are on our own in this regard.”

Harry hadn’t considered the fact that it would cost money to do this. “Well, obviously, my money should be used to pay for it. Do I have enough to pay for whatever has to be done?”

“Yes, of course, Harry, the cost will not exceed a thousand Galleons. There is far more than that in your vault, that is no problem.”

“How much is in your vault, anyway?” asked Ginny.

“I have no idea,” Harry admitted. “It’s a lot, is all I know.”

“I took the liberty of having the Gringotts goblins count it shortly before you came to Hogwarts six years ago,” said Dumbledore. “At that time, the balance was forty-two thousand, eight hundred seventy-seven Galleons.” Harry saw the Weasleys’ eyebrows rise.

Harry looked blank, then said, “I’m sorry, but I guess the number doesn’t mean that much to me... I don’t know what it represents, it’s just a number.”

“If this helps, at current exchange rates based on the price of gold in world markets, it is approximately two hundred and thirty thousand pounds. Exchange rates are deceptive, because wizards tend to need less currency than Muggles, but it should give you an idea. It may also help to consider it as equal to ten years of your current salary, or more than twice what is necessary to purchase a comfortable house.”

“So it’s way more than I need,” said Harry, “especially since I’m getting a salary now. You’re not going to object to this, are you?” Harry asked Arthur and Molly, concerned. “Because it’s just because of me that it’s necessary, after all.”

“That has nothing to do with it, Harry,” said Molly. “But the fact is that we couldn’t afford it anyway, so we accept that your money has to be used. We wanted to talk to you about that, to make sure you had no problems with it, though we knew you wouldn’t. But some work is going to have to be done on the house, and I was thinking, as long as that was being done, there were some other things that have nothing to do with security that would be nice to do at the same time. My answer to the Bill question you asked before was that we wouldn’t accept gold from you unless we had a particular purpose in mind. Now we do, so—“

Harry was nodding happily. “Really, you should buy or do anything you want.”

Ginny smiled, finding Harry’s attitude amusing. “What were you thinking of?”

“For example, I’d like to have the stairs taken out and rebuilt, they’re not as sturdy as I’d like them to be. Also, the roof needs work, and Arthur would be very keen on having electricity installed. And this kitchen table is very old, I read about this new one that cleans the plates after you finish eating and puts them away by itself..”

“The more you say, Mum, the happier he gets,” said Ginny.

Harry nodded. “I’d be really happy for you to do that, you know that.”

Molly smiled, embarrassed. “We know that, Harry, we wouldn’t even suggest it if we weren’t so sure of how you felt about this. You have to understand, even though we know it makes you happy, it’s still a bit difficult to ask. It’s only because we love you so much that we’ll do it.”

“I’m really glad, Molly,” Harry said earnestly. “Both that you love me, and that you’ll do it. I especially like the idea of the table, it’ll save you lots of effort.”

“Thank you, Harry,” she said. “I thought I would go get a few things today, and place a few orders, while you and Professor Dumbledore work on the anti-Disapparation plotting.”

“Shouldn’t we go to Gringotts first, then? Oh, wait, you can get gold out of my vault anyway, you’ve done it before.”

“No, I can’t now,” said Molly. “When you were underage, Professor Dumbledore had a trusteeship of your account, and it was with his permission that I could access it. Now, even though you’re not yet seventeen, you’re still of age, so only you can access your vault. But you can give me permission to do so, I have one of the forms from Gringotts here.” She took it out and handed it to him. “You just have to sign here and tap your wand over the signature.”

He did so, and handed it back to her. “I’m really sorry about all the problems this will cause—“

Molly waved him off. “Harry, really. Having you with us for the summer is compensation enough. It’s very sweet of you to worry, though. Now, I should be off, and you can get on with the plotting.” She kissed him on the cheek, then Ginny, then left the room.

“Let us get started, then,” said Dumbledore, getting up from the table and heading for the front door. Arthur followed, saying, “I’d like to watch for a while, I’ve never seen this done before.” Harry and Ginny followed behind him.

They walked outside to see Fawkes flying around the yard, coming to rest on Dumbledore’s shoulder. Harry felt a wave of sadness as he recalled the reason that Fawkes was spending more time than usual in Dumbledore’s presence. Already

holding hands with Ginny, he gripped hers more tightly and looked at her. Reading his expression, she touched his cheek in sympathy and whispered, “Be happy when you get to be with him, Harry, like now.”

Harry felt comforted as much by her presence as by her words. They caught up to Dumbledore and Arthur at a spot outside the boundaries of the Weasley property. “We will do a smaller plot first, just for practice and to make sure it works properly. Use the same spell you would for an anti-Disapparation field, but mentally focus it towards a spot on the ground; imagine a beam of energy emanating from your wand. You should move it across the ground at a rate of no more than three inches every second. First, please make a circle with a one-yard diameter.”

Harry did so, though the circle wasn’t very neat. It seemed strange to see energy coming from his wand like that. After he finished, Dumbledore stepped into the center of the circle. After a few seconds, he said, “Excellent, Harry, I cannot Disapparate. Now I will show you the area to be included in the plotting.”

After he did, Harry got started; Dumbledore suggested that he rest every other minute, as he had to concentrate to keep up the energy beam. He wanted to keep his arm around Ginny while he did it, but he had to keep moving while using the beam, and it was hard for them to move in tandem while not disturbing Harry’s aim or concentration, so they just held hands instead. Arthur went in fifteen minutes after they got started; Harry told Ginny she could go in too if she wanted, and was rewarded with a ‘don’t be stupid’ look.

It took three hours; Harry felt tired from the mental exertion, but satisfied. If he was really stronger than Dumbledore, this was a way to put his talent to good use. After he finished, they stepped outside the circle, and Dumbledore asked Harry to Apparate into the Weasleys’ living room. He tried, but nothing happened. “That is good, Harry, I cannot either. It is successful.”

They headed back to the house. “Sir,” Ginny asked, “wouldn’t it be better if Harry could Apparate in and out, so he could get away if there was an attack?”

Dumbledore glanced at Ginny, amused. “There is an obvious flaw in the assumption underlying your question, Ginny.”

She thought for a moment, then grimaced in annoyance. “Oh, of course, if the house was attacked, Harry wouldn’t go anywhere, he’d stay and fight.”

Harry was glad she understood that and didn’t protest. “What do you think are the chances there’ll be an attack, sir?”

“I would be amazed if there was one,” said Dumbledore. “What you have just done is only one of many security measures that will be in place by the time summer begins. There will be alarms, Dark magic detectors, and other protections in place. Aurors will at all times be ready to take a fireplace here at a moment’s notice. An attack would be a major risk for the Death Eaters, doubly so considering that their intended target is now stronger than they are.”

Ginny squeezed Harry’s hand proudly as they walked up the front steps and into the house. It’s all because of you, he thought, as he met her eyes.

Upon returning to Hogwarts, Ginny asked Harry if they could go to his office so they could talk privately before they returned to Gryffindor Tower. They entered Harry’s office, and Harry locked both the door leading to the hall and the one leading to the classroom. He smiled at her and said, “So, was it really talking that you wanted to do?”

He noticed that she seemed a little nervous, but now she smiled. “Actually, yes, but now that you mention that...” They embraced and had a long kiss, then sat back down. “That’s always so good,” he said. “What did you need to talk to me about?” Now clearly nervous, she took a deep breath. Harry was immediately concerned; what could she be so nervous about?

“I had... an emotional reaction to something that happened recently,” she began haltingly. “When I tell you what it was, you might be upset, you might think it wasn’t fair of me to feel that way. But I think I need to tell you what happened. Last night, when you suddenly left Gryffindor Tower, I had no idea where you had gone,

so when you didn't come back soon, I went to look at my map. You were in Dumbledore's quarters, and Hermione was with you. When I first looked at the map, your dot and Hermione's were almost on top of each other, which I knew meant that you were in close contact, like hugging. My first reaction... I was jealous, Harry. I couldn't imagine what was going on, why you and she were there. Then soon after that, you three were on what I assumed was a sofa, and your dots were on top of each other again, for a long time. I knew nothing like that was going on, because he was there, too, but I was going crazy wondering what was going on. I did nothing but look at that map for, like, an hour and a half. Then your dots and hers were in the middle of the room, where you obviously slept, and he went back into his room."

Harry had said nothing while she was talking, but was having very strong emotional reactions. When she stopped talking for a moment, he thought she was going to continue, but he couldn't stop himself. "I can't believe you thought that!" he exclaimed. "I thought you understood how it was with me and Hermione! But even if it wasn't her, how could you even think... do you really think I would do that to you?" He felt outraged, bewildered, and upset. "I thought you knew me better than that."

She looked desperately sad. "I do, Harry, I do, you have to believe that. I'm not saying it was right, and I'm ashamed I felt that way. Really, I knew, like, my mind knew, that it was nothing, that there was some good reason. But it was like something was grabbing at me, saying 'you're going to lose him, you can't keep him, he's too good for you.' I tried to ignore it, to push it away, but I couldn't get rid of it. I didn't want to feel that way." Her misery was clear in her eyes, but Harry was still too upset to sympathize.

"Ginny, you know you're not going to lose me! I've said it so many times..." Harry felt as though he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "How could you think that?" he repeated. "He's going to die! He's so important to me, and I just found out he's going to die! How could you—"

”I didn’t know that!” she shouted, tears in her eyes. “I was back in my dormitory, looking at a map! I had no idea what had happened!” She tried to collect herself and stop crying. He took out his wand and swished it at the doors to soundproof the room.

She stopped crying and started talking again, a pleading look in her eyes. “Harry, you have to put yourself in my position. I didn’t know what had happened, I had no information except what I was seeing on the map. Maybe if that was you, you’d be all logical, reasoning out what might have happened. I wanted to be that way, I really tried. But I just couldn’t. I didn’t think you would do that, Harry. I didn’t think Hermione would, and certainly not in Dumbledore’s quarters. But I had no idea, and my worst fears just came to the front of my mind, and stayed there.”

She looked at him, willing him to understand. “You don’t know, Harry,” she said, anguished. “I don’t know if you can understand it. Haven’t you ever had a fear, an irrational fear, that you just couldn’t get out of your mind? Every day, I fear I’m going to lose you. Sometimes I fear I’ll lose you to Voldemort, but sometimes, I just think I’m not good enough for you. When I’m with you, it’s not so bad, I see how you look at me, and I feel better. But when I’m alone, I think all these things. You’re Harry Potter, you could do so much better, there are so many better women out there, who would love to have you. And I’m just so ordinary. What if, some day...” Unable to finish her sentence, Ginny dissolved into tears, her head in her hands.

Sympathy finally overtook Harry’s anger and disbelief. He moved his chair over next to hers, and gently pulled her head onto his shoulder, where she continued to cry. “Ginny, you’re the one I want,” he said, holding her. “And you’re far from ordinary. You’re pretty, you’re smart, you’re funny, you’re interesting...”

“But there’s a lot of women out there who are even more of those things,” she said through tears. “Look at Tonks, she’s everything you said, and she’s an Auror. She may have acted like she was kidding, because she didn’t want to get her hopes up, but she’d have had you in a second if you’d looked at her like you were serious.”

“But I didn’t,” he pointed out, trying to be sympathetic. “I wasn’t trying not to, I just was afraid to fall in love. But I did, anyway, with you.” He gripped her shoulders. “Whatever it is that makes you you, that’s what I fell in love with. There may be lots of other girls, but there’s only one you. And you’re who I love, and I always will.”

They stood and hugged each other fiercely, clinging to each other. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I know how you feel, I really do. It’s not like you don’t tell me enough. I know that you’d never leave me. But I worry anyway, Harry. I can’t help it, I wish I could. Please don’t be mad at me for it. You would never do anything bad to me, and I’m not trying to say I think you would. But it’s hard for me. I... just have to get used to it, I guess. Funny... like Dad said, I have the most desirable man in the wizarding world, I just didn’t realize that there would be a drawback too, or that it would be this. I tried not to get my hopes up, just like Tonks did. I told myself I could never have you, that you were way too good. Now I have you, but some part of me is still saying that.”

It was slowly dawning on Harry that this was very close to what Tonks and Cassandra had been saying yesterday. He realized that this was not so much jealousy as insecurity. I was supposed to not be annoyed when this happened, he thought, looks like I messed that up. “You are good, Ginny, you’re really, really good. I’m sorry I didn’t understand it right when you told me about it. I just thought you were saying that I’m such a bad person that I would do that to you. I should have known better.”

“How would you know? You don’t see yourself like other people see you, Harry, you don’t really understand how desirable you are. How could you realize that I would feel this way?” She looked up at him and touched his face. “I was scared to tell you this. I really didn’t want to, I knew how it would sound. I almost didn’t. But I talked to Mum, and she said I should, because you needed to understand how I felt when it was something that made me feel like I did. I was so



miserable last night, and then this morning, when you told us about Dumbledore, I was so ashamed. I still am.”

“You didn’t know,” he said comfortingly.

“You need to know what you’re getting, Harry. I hope I’ll change, I hope I stop feeling like I’m not worthy of you. Part of me knows it’s not a question of whether I’m worthy or not, you just love me, and that’s all I need. But something like this could happen again, and I don’t want to suffer like I did last night. I hope it doesn’t.”

Harry’s heart went out to her. He knew what it felt like to feel unworthy, and it was terrible; he had never imagined anyone would feel it when comparing themselves to him. “I’ll do my best, Ginny. I’ll try to understand, I’ll try to help you. I don’t think I’m very good at this sort of thing, there’s so much I don’t understand. But I’ll try really hard, because I hate to see you like this. I love you so much...”

“I love you too,” she said, holding him again. “Now I’m starting to worry that if I do this too much, you’ll get fed up, and...”

Harry choked down impatience. However many times I have to tell her, I will, he thought. “That can never happen. You shouldn’t worry, because nothing you can do would make me want to leave you, including worrying that I’d leave you.”

She chuckled at how that sounded. “I wonder if all girls are like this, or if it’s just me,” she said, finally starting to feel better, Harry could tell. “Of course, most girls don’t have you as their special person. I’m so lucky, I should just appreciate it instead of worrying. I want to. Like I said, I do when I’m with you.” Harry didn’t know what he could say that he hadn’t said already, so he just kept holding her, moving his hand over her hair, trying to reassure her.

She looked at him with gratitude. Her expression very serious, she said, “You know, I hope, that the reaction I had has nothing to do with how bad I feel for you about Dumbledore. It’s not like, too bad about him, but I have my own

problems. I just didn't know, and by the time I did, I had already gone through a lot. But you know I feel terrible for you, and I'll do everything I can to support you."

"I know," he said. "It was just bad timing, bad circumstances. And I should have talked to you before running off to his quarters."

"You were in grief, Harry, you couldn't be expected to think of that kind of thing."

"But you're the one I should go to when I'm in grief. Probably the damn privacy thing has a lot to do with it. I love Hogwarts, but sometimes I think I'll be glad for us to graduate just so we can be alone whenever we want."

"That will be nice," she agreed, looking wistful. After a pause, she asked, "Why do you think Hermione didn't tell me, though? She figured it out. She could've sent me down there, or at least taken me with her."

Harry was a little surprised at Ginny's tone; he wondered whether Ginny blamed Hermione for not having done so. "I don't know," he said. "I guess she just didn't think of it either. I guess I can't blame her for not thinking of it, since I didn't think of it."

Ginny didn't react, and was silent for a minute again. "It's funny, the things you think about when you're in the state I was last night. Well, not funny funny, but you know what I mean. I was thinking about you and Hermione... let me ask you, did you ever think that you might end up with her? Not even seriously thinking about it, just, random thoughts?"

Harry knew that even if the answer to the question was 'yes,' he shouldn't say that; he wasn't sure, but he assumed that Ginny was asking for reassurance. "I guess I wouldn't say I never thought of it, but hardly at all," he answered. "I mean, I never had a sister, so I don't know what it's like, but she always felt more like a sister." He paused, then added, "Like an older sister, even though we're the same age."

She smiled a little. "You mean, because she's always telling you what to do."

“Not only me, of course, but yes,” he agreed. “I don’t mean anything nasty to her by that—you know I really love her, as a friend—but someone being bossy and telling you what to do isn’t the kind of thing that makes you think about wanting to spend your life with that person, or feel romantic about them.”

“Good thing I don’t do that,” said Ginny humorously. More seriously, she added, “I can definitely see that. I’ve talked to Neville a few times, and I think they’re going to have problems with that, at some point.”

Harry’s eyebrows went up. “He said that?”

“No, he didn’t. This is just what I think. I probably talk with him more than the others in the group, except you,” she explained. “A lot of times, as far as our group goes, it’s just the two of us in the common room. You’re teaching or in the staff room, Hermione’s always in the library, and Ron’s sometimes planning Quidditch stuff, or flying. Sometimes I ask him how it’s going with Hermione, and he talks about it. He’s told me about a few problems they’ve had, and sometimes I have to bite my tongue not to butt in. He just doesn’t stand up for himself enough, he’s too quick to assume things are his fault. In that relationship, she’s the boss. Not that she’s overbearing, or bad—she’s just being herself. But he needs to assert himself more. I don’t want to interfere, because I’m Hermione’s friend, too, and I don’t want to be taking sides. I have tried to gently suggest that he be more active in letting her know how he feels, but I can tell he’s just not comfortable doing that. So, I worry that there might be problems. I hope not, though.”

Harry didn’t know what to say, as this was very far from his area of expertise. “I hope not, too. I hadn’t thought of it that way, but it’s funny that they ended up together, considering the way they are, like that.”

She nodded. “Well, he’s changed a lot over the past year. Maybe he’ll keep changing. We’ll see.” After a pause, she said, “We should get back to the common room, they’re probably still celebrating. But while we’re here... well, remember what Katie said earlier.” He smiled, and they fell into a kiss.

Upon returning to Gryffindor Tower, Harry and Ginny did their best to enjoy the victory celebration. There was a spirited discussion about the importance of equipment in Quidditch after Colin, under pressure from Ron and Katie, admitted that a deciding factor in his choice of Ron as Star of the Match had been the fact that Ginny had used a Firebolt, whereas Ron had no special equipment.

After dinner, Harry sat with Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville to do homework. This was his first chance all weekend, and he did his best, though it was still difficult for him not to think about Dumbledore too much. At least, he thought gratefully, he didn't have nearly as much homework as the others. They had eight classes to his five, except Hermione with ten, and two of his classes—Defense Against the Dark Arts and Care of Magical Creatures—had very little homework.

In bed later, he tried to read more of *Reborn From the Ashes*, but again found it hard to concentrate. Fawkes sang to him, and it occurred to him that his dormitory-mates got this benefit when he was in a bad state of mind; both Dean and Seamus had mentioned to him that they always enjoyed it when Fawkes sang, and Harry knew that the other four had an understanding that if Fawkes was singing, they would make sure the others knew so they could come to the dormitory and listen if they wanted.

He practiced Occlumency at the usual time, and with Fawkes' help, finally fell asleep an hour later than usual. When he woke up the next morning, he remembered that Dumbledore had been in one of his dreams, but he couldn't remember the situation. He figured it wasn't too surprising, considering what had happened over the weekend. As he got ready for the day, he wondered how he could spend more time with Dumbledore. Five weeks didn't seem like very much time.